

Some of the Issues President-Elect Biden will face on college campuses across the country



David H. Gunning II | Monday, November 9, 2020

When Joe Biden is sworn in as our 46th president (barring any legal challenges) he will face a higher education playing field that has enormous challenges and opportunities. This article will focus on the challenges he faces.

(1) COVID-19: How does the president handle the delicate balance of thousands of college students testing positive (but most not getting sick) with the desire and need of the students to get their education and engage and enjoy their collegiate life? Further, deep financial problems stemming from enrollment drops and increased instructional expenses have forced thousands of layoffs and left an unknown number of colleges teetering on the brink of failure. Factor in the enormous regional differences with regards to results and attitudes of the virus, and you will find that this is his No. 1 issue regarding higher education he has to deal with.

(2) The Cost of a College Education: Even before the pandemic, getting a college degree, even at a public university, was extremely expensive. Families and students face the enormous pressure of getting a college education versus the reality of student loans and long-term debt that can be staggering. Factor in the high rate of student loan default, and you have a real mess. But how does a president deal with this crisis? It is a very easy campaign slogan to say “College should be free!” and everyone cheers! It is a very easy campaign slogan to say “wipe out student debt!” and everyone cheers. But the economic realities of

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these decisions are staggering. Where would we even find the money to pay for these lofty goals? However, no matter what he wants to do, the cost of a college education has to be dealt with. This issue must be high on the President's list as well.

(3) Title IX: For the past 12 years there has been a deep struggle with how to deal with Title IX sexual assault issues on campus. The Obama administration sought to correctly protect victims (mainly women) from the antiquated and unjust way alleged victims were treated on college campuses across the country. The Obama administration made it much easier for victims to bring their allegations to light. The problem became that in many cases, the new rules went too far. All of a sudden we went from the victim having no rights to the accused being presumed guilty and having to prove their innocence to remain on campus. The process seemed unfair. So the Trump administration changed the rules regarding Title IX, and they went into effect fairly recently. The changes allowed the accused a lot of rights that were perceived to have been lost, including the right to confront their accusers. Further, they disallowed colleges from having one person as the collector of facts and the decision maker. So the challenge for Biden will be, can he find a balance between the two sides that will allow victims to come out of the shadows and report their abuse, while at the same time protecting the rights of the accused so that they are not presumed guilty?

(4) Foreign Students/Immigration Reform: Prior to the Trump administration, the greatest growth universities enjoyed in the U.S. both demographically and financially was from the enormous influx of foreign students. Universities improved their rankings, their demographics, and their bank accounts because of the incredible increase in foreign students that started in the mid-90s and continued until about 2018. Then the Trump administration's war on illegal immigration has had a chilling effect on colleges. Last year foreign students only increased .05 percent across the country. It was lowest rate in over 25 years. The challenge Biden faces is how to navigate the need for foreign students to be able to come to this country and learn and bolster our nation's universities in many positive ways, and the very real crisis of illegal immigration and the crisis it imposes on our health care and education systems.

(5) The Loss of Free Speech on Campuses: For as long as I could remember, a college campus was the place where you came to hear new ideas and different points of view, both inside and outside the classroom. There was always the tradition, starting with the civil rights movement, to the Vietnam War, to apartheid, to equal rights for all, where campuses were a place where student voices on all sides of issues could be heard and celebrated. Today, that tradition of free speech and debate is largely gone on campuses, or at least under heavy attack. The folks that used to champion free speech back in the 60s, 70s and 80s seem to have forgotten what free speech meant. No longer can opposing or controversial speeches be allowed to be heard on universities across the country. Today, whether it is the battle between liberal vs. conservatism; the battle over Title IX; antisemitism, or other hot button issues, if you are not perceived to be on the "correct" side of the discussion, you are thwarted and even threatened at college campuses across the country. Biden needs to meet this challenge head-on and lead this country back to a place where college campuses can be the place of discussion and thought, not breeding grounds for hate and intolerance.

There are many other issues to face such as the never ending challenge of race relations, LGBTQ rights, policing issues, profit vs. nonprofit colleges, NCAA issues, and student-athletes being paid for use of their likeness just to name a handful. What we need out of this new administration is leadership and courage to face both those who voted for him and those who did not, and help restore our higher education field to the best place it can be.

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