
Regional

How higher ed will fare under GOP president

Last week we reported that when it comes to higher education, the Republican platform for this election was a single paragraph with no real details of what they propose to do for the next four years. Given that, the only thing we can do to discern what their policies will be for the sector is to analyze their speeches and past policies and stances.

For example, during their Cleveland convention Republican leaders propose to decouple accreditation from federal financial aid. That means that a lot of colleges and universities will feel no pressure to maintain a minimum of standards and rigor while being able to issue diplomas without any constraints – other than, of course, what the students are willing to pay. Employers, therefore, will have no way to make sure that college graduates they hire have the minimum qualifications and skills to perform their job.

Their platform also calls for encouraging “new systems” of learning beyond the traditional ones, probably referring to a vast use of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) whose effectiveness has been severely questioned by numerous studies and whose business model remains to be proven. That will translate into even looser safeguards to ensure that students are learning what they should.

Because they decry colleges and universities as “liberal hotbeds,” some Republicans want to regulate the free exchange of ideas so that students are not exposed to the ones that go against party doctrine. They also want to weaken Title IX, the federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in federally funded institutions. They argue that the statute

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has been used to press too many investigative and prosecutorial practices on sexual assaults, a problem more serious on campuses than many want to acknowledge.

They also believe that the federal government “should not be in the business of originating student loans.” They want more participation from the private sector, mostly banks. Currently there is a 2010 law barring banks from issuing federal student loans.

Any change would increase student debt by allowing higher interest rates for loans, as well as increasing the probability of predatory practices by financial institutions.

Regarding the top of the ticket, this is what we know. Trump has no previous experience in elected office nor has he made reference to specific policies on higher education. The only experience he has had with higher education is the now defunct “Trump University,” a venture that has been the subject of multiple lawsuits in different states and that has been almost universally labeled as a scam. One may assume that under a Trump administration, private for-profit institutions, like his so-called university, will be supported despite the fact that they are the main source of student debt and that their financing is largely based on federal subsidies, costing taxpayers billions of dollars.

In fact, when he visited Simpson College, a private, conservative liberal arts college in Iowa, he declared, “I’ve been asked that question so many times by so many great young people that are up to here with debt,” Trump said. “They don’t know what to do. And I tell them, you’ve got to get jobs.”

Trump seems to have a very low concept of academia. A graduate of the Wharton School (of business) at the University of Pennsylvania, Trump wrote in his 1987 book *The Art of the Deal*, “Perhaps the most important thing I learned at Wharton was not to be overly impressed by academic credentials. It didn’t take me long to realize that there was nothing particularly awesome or exceptional about my classmates, and that I could compete with them just fine. The other important thing I got from Wharton was a Wharton degree. In my opinion, that degree doesn’t prove very much, but a lot of people I do business with take it very seriously, and it’s considered very prestigious.”

His education advisers, such as Sam Clovis, have also said that they want to make it more difficult for students at public colleges to major in the liberal arts by preventing students majoring in those areas access to student loans. Such a policy runs contrary to the fact that a liberal arts education is essential to increase skills that help to make people successful regardless of their profession, such as critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and team work, a set of skills that about 80 percent of employers agree are necessary for success in the labor market.

Despite his anti-immigration rhetoric, Trump has argued that international students who come to the

United States for college should be allowed to stay here and work after graduation. This is based on one of his tweets last summer in which he wrote, “When foreigners attend our great colleges & want to stay in the U.S., they should not be thrown out of our country.”

He has also said that the Department of Education, which enforces laws that protect students and employees in education, should be “largely shut down.”

His running mate, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence doesn’t have an especially long record of achievements in higher education. He once supported the Indiana program “You Can. Go Back,” which was aimed at facilitating his state’s residents with some college credits to return to school and finish their degrees. Pence also supported the controversial “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” enacted last year that critics said amounted to a license to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans. Private and public colleges and universities across Indiana reacted negatively to its passage very strongly, many condemning the law or at least pledging to uphold their own nondiscrimination policies.

After such criticism, Mr. Pence reacted by saying he would support legislation to “clarify the intent of the law.”

Next week we will analyze the potential effects of a Democratic administration on higher education.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>