Ed Day

Headline: Student Loan Debt is a Symptom of a Flawed Funding System

Yep, the debate over college funding has devolved into this: bickering over slightly reducing the interest rates of student loans. In February, Minnesota Senators Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken were among the lawmakers on Capitol Hill trying to make things marginally easier by allowing college students to refinance their student loans at a slightly lower interest rate.

According to Sam Brodey, the D.C. correspondent for *Minnpost*, the average Minnesota graduate has $31,000 in loans to pay off. Over a typical 10-year-payment schedule, the interest alone would total $7,200. The proposal on the table is to lower the interest on student loans from 4.29 to 3.86 percent. This would save a Minnesota graduate $720 over those 10 years.

This modest attempt to move back the dial, which is a long way off from Bernie Sanders’s call for free higher education, was met with fierce resistance from Republicans and conservative think tanks. Their reasons are shockingly asinine. Per Brodey, many conservatives view the proposal as an election-year stunt designed to gin up anger and motivate young people to vote.

John Kline, MN-CD 2, the retiring Republican who chairs the House Committee on Education and the Workforce has well-documented ties to for-profit higher education industry, sat on the fence and said a balance helping students and not burdening taxpayers.

Andrew Kelly of the American Enterprise Institute basically said relief to students was too little to make a difference and that the proposal is flawed because rich people will also benefit, according to Brodey’s article (which I am summarizing in the most caustic fashion possible). Funny thing is this: These are the same arguments Republicans and conservatives have used for decades when they supported defunding colleges in the first place.

First, minimization. The tuition increases were always framed in terms of beer money, condoms, lattes, Flappy Bird, dating apps or whatever else made college students sound like petty jerks at the time.

Remember, these relatively small increases have been occurring every budget cycle for decades. But, like lobsters not realizing they were being boiled to death, students, parents and the American public adjusted to the incremental change and accepted it as normal.

Second, the plan isn’t targeted enough, and rich people will benefit. True this is an across the board proposal, but ironically, conservatives like Kelly used the same argument *in favor* of raising tuition. Just as rich people would benefit from lower tuition, conservatives have long favored raising tuition (so that colleges could act like a business and use rich people’s tuition as a revenue stream) and then making college affordable through massive financial-aid programs for low-income students and minorities.

Take if from this chucklehead who had full access to a Lexis database as night janitor—those massive financial-aid programs never come to fruition.

Raising tuition under the Republicans’ vaunted “high-tuition, high-aid model” was purported to make colleges more efficient as they fought for the funding attached to each and every student. Instead, it has resulted in skyrocketing tuition and the proliferation of less-than-awesome for-profit colleges chasing student loan funds. (And to a lesser extent, very reputable private colleges have been able to raise their tuition because many better-to-do families take advantage of the tax breaks allowed by 529 accounts, which are basically IRAs for college.)

For some reason, conservatives like the AEI’s Kelly only seem to care about targeting funds for low-income people and minorities when they want to derail a proposal. (This is a very common tactic. Think of all the politicians who champion more funding for bus transit only when they want to thwart funding for light-rail projects.)

Finally, Kline’s fence-sitting under the pretense of looking out for the taxpayer is a flaming bag of doggie-doo. Kline is 68 and earned his bachelor’s degree in 1969. The standard argument for years has been that no tax dollars should fund individual choices. However, in order to even get an entry-level position, going to college is not optional.

Another supposed watchdog for the taxpayer is former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, who started at the University of Minnesota in 1980 – when tuition was $500 a year.

Let me repeat that -- $500 a year at the state’s premiere land-grant university. Today, Metropolitan State’s tuition is the lowest for Minnesota universities at $7,491 a year. Minimum wage in 1980 was $3.00 per hour and is currently $9.00 per hour.

So, do a little math and roll your eyes the next time a politician like the 50-something Pawlenty (a son of a truck driver!) tells a bootstraps story about how he sucked it up and worked his way through college.

Even though a savings of $72 a year in loan interest will only allow me to buy one more burrito a month, it’s a step in the right direction. For me, it’s more important to think about why such a paltry move has garnered so much adamant opposition.

Probably because this incremental approach is exactly how conservatives and Republicans got tuition to go up so much in the first place.