What Free College Really Means

It's not just about tuition. It's a way to reassert the power of public goods in America.

By E. Tammy Kim
Contributing Opinion Writer

June 30, 2019

Until a few years ago, I taught an undergraduate research and writing course at Cooper Union, in Manhattan's East Village. Founded in 1859, Cooper Union is the namesake of Peter Cooper, who used his fortune from real estate, steel, railroads and glue to endow a college where education would be as "free as air and water" for aspiring architects, engineers and artists. The promise held up for more than a century.

But in the fall of 2011, after years of mismanagement, Cooper Union faced financial ruin. It announced that it would begin charging graduate students tuition — and possibly undergraduates, too. For months, with the support of activists from Occupy Wall Street, Cooper students held walkouts, sit-ins and noisy rallies. My students weren't just fighting to keep their own education affordable. They were standing up for the principle of education as a public good.

I've been thinking about them a lot in recent months, even more so since Elizabeth Warren announced a plan for free public college and a partial debt jubilee, funded by "an ultra-millionaire tax." A few days ago, Bernie Sanders

introduced the College for All Act, which would eliminate all $1.6 trillion of the nation's student debt and fund states and tribes to offer tuition-free higher education.

We will likely hear a lot of back and forth over the policy details during the Democratic primary race. Would the Sanders and Warren plans reach the neediest students? Wouldn't debt forgiveness disproportionately help the middle class? Yet such criticisms, while well-intentioned, miss the emotional core of free college. The point, the red-hot sell, is that some things, like education, should be had by all — on equal terms. The debate over student debt is ultimately about our nation's indefensible inequality.

I saw, at Cooper Union, how a conversation that started with education could grow into something much, much larger. During the tuition crisis, the school's board of trustees made an early concession, promising that no one currently enrolled would be affected. Current students nonetheless felt betrayed. Won Cha, whom I'd taught the previous year, had taken a personal leave in the fall of 2012, but spent nearly the entire semester helping to fight the tuition policy. For him, it was deeply personal: he was the son of an immigrant nail salon worker, yet Cooper had let him "think about ideas and political issues" and study art. "It was liberating," he told me.

And after years of protests, lawsuits and bureaucratic stalling, he and his Cooper comrades won. In 2018, Cooper Union agreed to the terms of a new plan: It could continue to temporarily charge its students up to $22,275 per year, half the cost of tuition, but would have to go free again in a decade. "The reason we took up arms and organized and worked with the faculty was because we realized that the ethos and soul of the school was disappearing," Won said.

Today, some 45 million Americans carry $1.6 trillion in student debt, and tens of thousands of people defrauded by for-profit colleges are still owed compensation. More than a dozen states, from Tennessee to Rhode Island, have recognized the depth of the crisis and moved to offer some tuition-free college; bills for various kinds of grants and fee relief are pending in half the states. Free higher education is popular not only with Democrats, but with 41 percent of Republicans.

As the sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom once observed, the "debate about free college tuition does something extremely valuable. It reintroduces the concept of public good to higher education discourse." And not just education: Medicare for all, a jobs guarantee, basic income and free child and elder care — each of these, like college for all, has moved from peripheral fantasy to organizing campaign to policy platform.

By 2028, when Cooper Union is again as "free as air and water," perhaps many other colleges will be, too. And if we are smart, and lucky in our politics, Americans will have revised our concept of government and what we owe to one another. Not long ago, many colleges were indeed free; much longer ago, elementary education was not. There is no natural law that deems one thing a public good and another a market-based luxury. It is up to us to decide.

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E. Tammy Kim is a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times, and a co-author and co-editor of Punk Ethnography, a book about the politics of contemporary world music. Her work has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, The New York Review of Books, The Nation, The New Yorker and many other outlets.

A version of this article appears in print on June 30, 2019, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: What Free College Really Means

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