

AGAINST AUSTERITY EDUCATION

WHEREAS, in the past twenty years, state funding for public colleges and universities has been catastrophically cut, on average by 26 percent since 1990, as states have adopted the neoliberal policy of reducing taxes for corporations and the highest earners while cutting and privatizing public services;¹ and

WHEREAS, the decrease in the rate of state taxes for the rich led to significant budget deficits in almost all 50 states, especially after the 2008 recession; and

WHEREAS, most states closed their deficits by shifting costs to the working class, the middle class and the poor, in part by increasing the share of taxes paid by these groups and in part by slashing vital public services such as education; and

WHEREAS, public colleges and universities have suffered disproportionately over the last two decades from this redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, often sustaining larger cuts than other state entities — in part because of the assumption that public money for universities could be replaced by private money from student tuition; and

WHEREAS, during the same twenty-year period, a college degree has become increasingly essential for individual economic stability, secure housing, healthcare and even increased life expectancy;² and

WHEREAS, during the same twenty-year period, the number of people of color, women and working-class people seeking a college degree has grown dramatically; for instance the period 1999-2009 saw a 38 percent increase in the number of bachelor's degrees conferred on people of color;³ and

WHEREAS, the convergence of these factors--planned disinvestment in public higher education by states and increased demand for college degrees – has had the predictable consequence of straining college budgets to the breaking-point, with the result that public colleges, especially those serving poorer populations and large percentages of people of color, have felt pressure to spend less and less per student on education; and

WHEREAS, it is in this economic and political context of artificial austerity that the "college completion agenda" has been promoted — by many of the same foundations, such as the Gates Foundation the Lumina Foundation, that have put millions of dollars behind charter schools, standardized testing, numerical teacher evaluations, and closing of schools based on test scores; and

WHEREAS, the college completion agenda, although it names an essential goal and raises critical questions about student success, stresses graduation rates above all, often relying on flawed and partial measures of completion; and

WHEREAS, the emphasis in the college completion agenda on graduation rates as the single measure of success is analogous to the emphasis on testing as the single measure of success in K-12 education, and can lead to valuing speed over quality and to opening the door to turning a significant public sector into a source for profit; and

WHEREAS, rather than call for increased public investment or a restoration of a fair rate of taxes on corporations and the rich, the proponents of the college completion agenda accommodate to the current underfunding of public higher education, seeking to increase graduation rates without increasing funding; and

¹ <http://www.demos.org/publication/great-cost-shift-how-higher-education-cuts-undermine-future-middle-class>

² http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/policy_briefs/brief9/

³ <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>

WHEREAS, the result of the emphasis on speed to graduation can be a drive for a diminished curriculum; college administrators feeling pressure to increase graduation rates without increasing costs have demanded the replacement of the rich curricula developed through faculty expertise by impoverished curricula that can be delivered at a lower cost; and

WHEREAS, there is little empirical evidence to support the idea that a narrow curriculum produces higher graduation rates and greater student success, while there is extensive evidence to show that more per-student investment in instruction correlates with greater student success; and

WHEREAS, a narrowed college curriculum tailored entirely to produce higher graduation rates risks becoming austerity education – education designed to accommodate to economic austerity and to prepare working- and middle-class students and students of color only for low-wage jobs in an austerity economy:

RESOLVED, that AFT champion the goal of college completion for every student who seeks a college degree; as the union that represents more higher education workers than any other union in the country, we have a profound understanding of the meaning of a college degree and a lived commitment to the project of college education; and

RESOLVED, that AFT acknowledge the value of all high-quality college education as an expansion of students' lives; and

RESOLVED, that AFT continue to evaluate initiatives arising from the "college completion agenda" and work to ensure that this agenda serves to expand and enrich college education, not to narrow and limit it; and

RESOLVED, that AFT continue to demand increased public investment in public higher education and work to ensure that a focus on college completion, important as that goal is, must not be allowed to divert attention from the need for investment, and that demands for "reform" not enable states and colleges to accommodate to conditions of scarcity for public higher education; and

RESOLVED, that AFT not allow the college completion agenda to open the door for the privatization of public higher education and its transformation into a source of profit.

Submitted by: Professional Staff Congress, Local 2334

President

Secretary