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What the proposed federal budget really means.

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Regional

What the proposed federal budget really means

The proposed 2018 budget by the Trump administration has been presented and now we have a clear picture of the list of programs related to higher education that will be either severely cut or totally eliminated.

Among the programs to be eliminated are the Public-Service Loan-Forgiveness program (which currently helps more than 550,000 students), Stafford Loans (offered to eligible students enrolled in accredited American institutions of higher education to help with their education) and the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (a federal assistance grant for college students with the greatest need for financial aid). It also includes plans to allow the Perkins Loan program to expire. This is a program based on financial need that assists American college students in funding their post-secondary education. The proposed budget will also cut spending in half on Federal Work-Study programs and will eliminate programs that foster foreign-language study, while reducing spending that supports international-education programs and exchanges, such as the Fulbright Scholar program, by 55 percent.

The direct consequences of these cuts will be a significant increase in student debt and the elimination of access to higher education for many low-income, first-generation and minority students.

The budget proposal also includes plans to phase out support for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the two major sources of funding for projects in those areas.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

Cuts to spending on scientific and medical research will also be unprecedented. The budget for the National Institutes of Health, the major source of funding in the health sciences, and known for their economic and health benefits, will be slashed by 22 percent. The budget for the National Science Foundation, the major engine behind scientific research in this country, will see its budget cut by 11 percent.

The Department of Energy will see its Office of Science budget cut by 17 percent. Its budget for research on energy efficiency and renewable energy will be cut by 70 percent. The Environmental Protection Agency will see its budget in science and technology cut by 44 percent, while the ARPA-E (Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy), the federal agency in charge of promoting and funding research and development of advanced energy technologies, will be eliminated.

As extreme as these budget cuts appear, they actually highlight a national trend. During the 1960s, after the threat represented by the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the United States decided to invest in scientific and technological research in particular, and in higher education in general. Not investing in science and technology was then seen to represent a threat to national security, and the federal government's share in supporting basic research was about 70 percent. Even before the

proposed budget by the White House, that support had been reduced to only 44 percent by 2015, according to data released last year by the National Science Foundation.

This budget proposal will most likely not be approved by Congress. It has been criticized by members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, with many Republicans calling it "Dead on Arrival." Many independent analysts have stated that this budget proposal will undermine our economic growth, public health, and national security by stalling U.S. technological innovation and scientific research, and the country's capabilities to respond to extreme weather and national security threats.

Budgets can be viewed as political statements. So just what is the Trump administration saying through this budget? It is not just to cut taxes for the rich in a country where overall taxation is already the lowest of any industrialized nation. Tax revenue in this country represents 26 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) – well below the 34 percent average for all developed countries.

Nor it is just to allow for an unprecedented and unnecessary increase in the defense budget. The U.S. defense budget is already greater than the next eight industrialized countries combined (most of which are our friends and allies). In fact, the U.S. defense budget represents about a third of all of the defense budgets of all of the countries of the world.

And it is not that we need to take money from our colleges, universities, and research centers to pay for a wall that we don't need.

So, why would anyone want this budget? Science and technology centers in particular, and

colleges and universities in general, generate facts that contradict certain political ideologies, whether about global warming, other environmental issues, or economic policies. So, what is the best way to get rid of them? By defunding them the same way many conservatives want to end abortion by defunding Planned Parenthood, even though abortions represent a minuscule portion of the overall health services that it provides to women.

This strategy is very similar to what is known in the military as a scorched-earth policy, targeting anything that might be useful to the enemy while advancing through, or withdrawing from, occupied territory. Any asset that can be used by "the enemy" becomes a target. For the Trump White House, this includes colleges and universities that they believe "teach liberal ideas," or research centers that generate data that prove that global warming is real and is caused by humans, that unregulated industry is a threat to human and environmental health, or that "supply-side economics" (the macroeconomic theory that by cutting taxes to the rich and eliminating regulation stimulates the economy) does not work.

These are the real objectives of these cuts, and the ideology behind this strategy is not new. It has been planned out by some conservative think tanks for decades – only now they have found the way to make it a reality. And it will benefit the few, regardless of the pain caused to the many.

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