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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2020 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2020 asked students to propose how they would make Maine “the way life should be” for young people so that more of them will choose to live in a state with one of the oldest populations in the nation. Essays have been edited for length.

THIRD-PLACE ESSAY

The College Conundrum:

Reanimating the American Dream for Maine Youth

by Neily Raymond

The large envelope curved around the inside of the mailbox, looking for all the world like a tall man stooping in a doorway. Hooking my fingers behind the mass of bills and peacockish flyers, it took a few moments to free my quarry. I'd barely read the return address before running into the house to scramble for a letter opener. The enclosed folder was a matte black, with the name of my Maine dream college embossed in glossy letters. I read the acceptance letter with quiet pride. They'd included a decal and a stiff little pennant depicting their mascot. The financial aid sheet was stowed in the back, somewhat apologetically. It was the first raindrop of a storm, cold and implausible on the back of my neck. Expected Family Contribution: \$30,000. Annually. I knew that my parents weren't able to help me out, that I would be paying for my education independently, and the only route to this college? Over \$100,000 in student loans, hanging over me forever.

I have no pretensions that my experience is unique. The US higher education industry is a money-gobbling

monster. It sucks in eager 18-year-olds, raring for a life-changing education, and spits out demoralized Jacob Marleys, sentenced to bemoan their chains of student debt for eternity. One in five adult Americans wears this financial shackle, according to *NBC News*, totaling 1.47 trillion dollars in 2018 (Chiwaya 2019).

In his book *The Epic of America*, James Truslow (1931) wrote of “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” This American Dream shines like a lantern in our nation's collective consciousness. Scores of immigrants converged on this land, attracted by the opportunity to rise with pure perseverance. Irish Catholics and Chinese, Filipinos and Poles, Germans and Mexicans embraced the tenet of “all men created equal” presented in our founders looping script—and this American Dream begot the world superpower we are today.

The higher education conundrum seems to render the American Dream futile. In his “Economic Bill of Rights” statement to Congress in 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1950) advocated “the right to a good education” as a cornerstone of American upward mobility. Yet increasing US college costs—more than 25 percent in the last 10 years (Hess 2019)—make further education prohibitive for many. This is, unfortunately, evident in Maine, which boasts some of the best colleges in the nation. Bowdoin, Bates, and Colby attract intellectuals from the world over, and the University of Maine is preeminent in academic circles, particularly for its pioneering climate change research. The need-based aid policies at the former three private colleges bar middle-class students, whose financial information results in mind-boggling family contributions. Even in the Maine public university system, students who are solid performers, yet who do not qualify for large merit scholarships, are burdened with startling amounts of debt.

In pursuit of better college monetary aid, students are dripping out of our state like a leaky faucet. This phenomenon, aptly described as “brain drain” (Woodard 2005), is in large part owing to out-of-state universities offering enticing financial prospects to young Mainers. The Benacquisto Scholarship program of Florida, for instance, presents full-ride packages to National Merit Scholars, including non-Florida residents, at all campuses in the state university system.¹ Many of these schools are highly ranked and even offer to pay students a yearly stipend for their attendance. This is not an exception, but a pattern in many US higher education institutions: University of Alabama, Wichita State University, University of New Mexico, and University

of Texas, to name a few (Sundquist 2019). When approached with the monetary support of out-of-state schools and blooming job prospects in those areas, students are jumping ship, and our state is losing its greatest boon—youthful vitality. The Maine brain drain must be stoppered, and quickly.

Providing a free college education to every Maine student with the ability to harness it would make remaining in our state feasible. New York, for instance, boasts the Excelsior program, enabling any New York student to attend any SUNY or CUNY school tuition-free. Sixteen other states, from California to Delaware, offer natives some form of an encompassing full-tuition scholarship program (Snider 2014).

Universal free education is a contentious topic, dramatically partisan, raising touchy questions of centralization and tax hikes. It is time to turn, then, to an international example that is radically sensible: the educational system of France. French students, in their final year of high school, can take the *baccalauréat*, a sort of high-stakes relative of our SAT. The students who pass their *bac* may advance to any French institute of higher education, entirely for free. Offering free tuition to Maine students who demonstrate academic merit would make it possible for Maine's bright young thinkers to stay in state. Another essential component of the French system: students with vocational leanings may choose to forgo the *bac* and pursue the *baccalauréat professionnel* for a free technical degree. Such an option here would round out the system, allowing Mainers who do not aspire to a four-year pathway to attend career-oriented programs at no cost, thus fortifying our state's skilled workforce.

The current widespread system—that of justifying adult students' financial capacity with their parents' income—is complete jabberwocky, given that many

students are financially independent. Instead, full-tuition merit scholarships for young adults who display aptitude would help Maine regain its grasp on, as Senator Smith described, “the stimulus, the fire, and the ambition” at our state's beating heart.²

Young Mainers are presented with two doors. Behind one, the promise of the American Dream and ascension to success. Behind the other, their home. We must not dismiss the validity of this struggle. We must recognize that we're in this boat together because Maine built all of us. Maine is in our thoughts, our innate ingenuity. Maine makes us different, and it makes us strong.

In his 2018 speech eulogizing President George H. W. Bush, Vice President Mike Pence used a Navy term: “ceiling and visibility unlimited” (Schwartz 2018). He extended this to a vision of American lives with “no barriers, no boundaries, no limits.” Let us give Mainers ceiling and visibility unlimited. By making it financially practicable for students to pursue their ambitions without forsaking their home, Maine will once again brim with the ebullience of youth. 🐦

NOTES

- 1 More information about the Benacquisto Scholarship program is available on the Florida Department of Education Office of Student Financial Assistance website (<https://www.floridastudentfinancialaidsg.org/SAPHome/SAPHome>).
- 2 https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Speeches_Smith_Declaration.htm

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picked up a book at age three and never looked back. She served as editor for both Hermon Key Club and Student Council and

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