The Policy of Federal Student Loans: Looking Backward and Looking Forward

Aaron Mohr
Federal student loans are a critical linchpin of American higher education. Federal student loans progressed from rare and means-tested to prevalent and universally available. Loan volume and amounts continue to rise in tandem with rising national higher education costs. Student debt is now the second largest source of household debt behind only home mortgages.

In the past fifty years, income for college graduates rose about 50%, while average student loan debt rose one hundred 83% in just a twenty-three-year period ending in 2012. In other words, student debt rose three times as much as income and in half the time. The

2. Roots, infra note 5, at 504 (noting student loans “brought on a deluge of federal intrusion into student financing of higher learning”).
expansion of federal student loans through congressional action coincided with a tightening of the requirements for student loan discharge in bankruptcy: from no additional requirements, to the much maligned “undue hardship” standard, to removing time limitations of collections, and finally to allowing federal benefit garnishment to repay student loans. The lack of a congressional definition of undue hardship also led to a profusion of judge-made law, with a consensus definition still out of reach today.

Rising student loans are a national concern because, as stated above, education costs—the impetus for student loans—greatly outpace the growth in real wages. Taken to their logical extreme, rising federal student loan balances will reach a point when the economic benefit will outweigh the cost. While college graduates average over $1 million more earnings throughout their careers than high school graduates, potential loan balances of $100,000 or more may be enough to deter large swaths of students from pursuing higher education, even though they are leaving future earnings on the table. If federal student loans lead to an inability or unwillingness to

16. The wealth gap between high school and college graduate accumulates most during peak earning years: during the late-career stage. Id. at 4 (disparate earning trajectories, i.e., salary divergence over time, accounts for some of the lifetime earning disparity). Entry-level wage differences are less pronounced across education levels. Heidi Shierholz et al., The Class of 2014: The Weak Economy Is Idling Too Many Young Graduates, ECON. POL’Y INST., at 18 (2014), http://www.cpi.org/files/2014/Classof2014FINAL.pdf (citing data that new high school graduates from age seventeen to twenty made around $20,400, while college graduates from age twenty-one to twenty-four made approximately $35,300, in 2014).
pursue degrees, America fails in its core democratic value of equal opportunity education—the very impetus for expanding loans.\footnote{H.R. Rep. 102-447, at 7 (1992). \textit{Id.} (discussing the national goal of equal education).}

Solving the issue of rising student loan balances first requires an examination of possible causes. Some scholars suggest that the very existence of loan programs leads to increasing demand and ultimately continued expansion of the loans available to be borrowed.\footnote{\textit{Id.}} Since federal student loans fund higher education, and higher education costs have increased dramatically,\footnote{\textit{Id.} at 504–05.} many posit increasing tuition is driving loan increases.\footnote{\textit{Id.} at 507.} Finally, other academics suggest that the great difficulty in discharging loans in bankruptcy prevents hopelessly uncollectible debts from being purged from the program, in turn raising the national aggregate loan balance higher.\footnote{\textit{Id.} at 515. A sub-theory of this cause posits that many debtors with meritorious claims for discharge of their student loans do not attempt to discharge them because of the expense of the separate bankruptcy hearing required for adjudication. Rafael I. Pardo & Michelle R. Lacey, \textit{The Real Student-Loan Scandal: Undue Hardship Discharge Litigation}, 83 \textit{Am. Bankr. L.J.} 179, 190–91 (2009). Additionally, these hearings are fraught with uncertainty due to the lack of a consensus definition of undue hardship. \textit{Id.}}

The proposal suggested in this Note attempts to hone in on the root cause of loan increases: higher education costs. Loans do not exist without a reason to borrow. While restructuring loans and loosening bankruptcy standards may alter loan balances, they are more akin to treating symptoms than treating the underlying disease. Federal student loans exist to pay tuition and other expenses, so it follows a permanent solution must address, on some level, the costs for which we borrow. This Note proposes setting maximum loan amounts to the seventy-fifth percentile of college costs in the U.S. This formula would not permit annual allowable growth, though it would adjust with inflation. Exceptions could be made for schools that prove exceptional value.

Part I of this Note outlines the history of federal student loan programs, the development of bankruptcy law to complement loan programs, and the emerging student loan crisis. Part II analyzes the most pertinent factors influencing loans and existing proposals to
alter the student loan landscape. Part III proposes a new solution to improve the long-term viability of the federal student loan programs.

I. HISTORY

The transformation of federal student loans from a minor federal program to a ubiquitous part of higher education began in 1958 with the National Defense Education Act. This investment in education during the height of the space race was at least in part to encourage Americans to pursue science and mathematics and thereby counter Russian advances during the ongoing Cold War. Given the success of these initial federal loans, the 1965 Higher Education Act included an expanded Guaranteed Student Loan Program. These loans, the inception of Stafford Loans, were available to the poorest students who needed outside financing to afford higher education.

With college costs rising and loan financing unavailable to most middle-class families, the political climate aligned for yet another expansion of federal student loans. The Middle-Income Student Assistance Act of 1978 followed. This Act worked within the existing federal framework of the Stafford Loan program (and minor


25. Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 473.


28. See supra note 26 and accompanying text.

29. Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 473.

30. Middle-Income Student Assistance Act, Pub. L. No. 95-566, 92 Stat. 2402 (1978). It provided for “financial assistance to millions of middle-income students who are now ineligible for most financial aid programs. In accomplishing this objective the level of federal assistance to students from low-income families is not reduced. It is, in fact, also increased.” H.R. REP. NO. 95-951, at 3 (1978).
grant programs) to provide up to $4.7 billion in loans in 1979 alone. The effect was immediate: within three years, federal student loans tripled. The periodic expansion continued again with the Higher Education Amendments of 1992. These Amendments were part of the frequent reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act, but in 1992 also included new loan programs: the umbrella Federal Family Education Loan Program, Family PLUS Loans, Federal Direct Loans, and Federal Perkins Loans.

Student loans and their increasing availability marked a gradual but fundamental shift in federal education funding. In 1965, the landmark Higher Education Act appropriated 68% of its funds to institutional aid for expenses like physical improvements, and only 32% to student aid. By 1992, the Higher Education Amendments to the Act funneled 97% of appropriations to student aid. Despite this shift, an enduring goal remained: equal opportunity to attain higher education.

Institutional aid, student grants, and student loans all promote this goal, however, student loans present a distinct quid pro quo: in exchange for opportunity, students promise to tap into their future...
success and repay the government and taxpayers. To implement this reciprocity and to prevent abuse, federal student loans are easily obtained and contain advantageous terms, but are exceedingly difficult to discharge in bankruptcy. The first Higher Education Act in 1965 did not have a higher standard for discharge of student loans in bankruptcy than was ordinary for other debts in such proceedings. By the 1970s, however, Congress became worried students were cheating the system by declaring bankruptcy before beginning work, thereby eliminating or reducing federal loan repayments. To combat this, an undue hardship standard was included in the Education Amendments of 1976. Despite continuing debate in Congress of whether educational debt should be treated differently than other debt, the undue hardship standard (when discharging federal student loans five years or less after repayment begins) was retained in the 1978 Bankruptcy Reform Act. The 1978 Act took the 1976 reforms and codified them directly into the Bankruptcy Code.

42. Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 475.
44. Federal student loans do not require a co-signor, have relatively low interest rates, contain hardship deferment possibilities, and can be eligible for income-based repayment schemes. Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 474–75.
45. U.S. Bankruptcy Code requires a debtor to demonstrate “undue hardship” before student loans may be discharged. 11 U.S.C. § 523 (a)(8) (LEXIS through Pub. L. No. 114-327). Lacking a legislated definition of undue hardship, courts have generally defined this term as a high bar for discharge, ranging from “certainty of hopelessness,” to something more than passing financial instability, even if severe. Cloud, supra note 14, at 784–85.
47. *In re Pelkowski*, 990 F.2d 737, 742 (3d Cir. 1993).
50. *In re Pelkowski*, 990 F.2d at 742.
53. *Id.* (codified throughout sections 11 and 20 of the U.S. Code).
increasing the undue hardship standard limit to seven years, and then eliminating the time limitation altogether. Undue hardship remains, to this day, the standard to discharge federal student loans in bankruptcy.

With the undue hardship standard firmly entrenched for federal student loans in bankruptcy proceedings, Congress extended this approach to private student loans in 2005. Later in 2007, Congress added a few alternatives to full student loan debt repayment with the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA), including income-based repayment and even loan forgiveness, but these alternatives were supplementary, not replacements for traditional student debt with its difficult discharge requirements.

Except for the recent alternatives, public and private student loan relief relies on discharge via the undue hardship standard written into the U.S. Bankruptcy Code at 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8). While continued emphasis on undue hardship ought to compel clear

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57. Id.
60. The CCRAA amended the income-contingent repayment plan to make it available for more types of loans and capped loan payments at 15% of a borrower’s adjusted gross income. H.R. Rep. 110-210.
61. The committee that drafted the bill took a tailored approach to loan forgiveness (as opposed to the wide availability of loans generally) by limiting it to public service workers. Id. “These targeted professions include: first responders, law enforcement officers, firefighters, nurses, public defenders, prosecutors, early childhood educators, librarians, and other public sector employees.” Id. The generosity of partial or complete loan forgiveness for these public sector employees is an attempt to spur students into careers of national need. Id. Where student loans were once directed to boost America’s performance in the science and technology-laden space race, today we see emerging federal education incentives directed toward contemporary areas of need. Specifically, $1,000 is forgiven for each year served in designated jobs, up to $5,000 total, and/or total Direct Loan forgiveness is available for “public sector employees” after ten years on the job. Id.
definitions for this legal term of art, “undue hardship” was statutorily undefined in the Education Amendments of 1976\(^ {63}\) and remained undefined the Bankruptcy Reform Act of 1978.\(^ {64}\)

In the absence of a legislated definition of undue hardship, courts imbue the term with what some scholars believe are unreasonably difficult conditions for discharging student loan debt in bankruptcy.\(^ {65}\) Four main tests have emerged from the federal circuit and district courts for determining undue hardship: the Johnson test,\(^ {66}\) the totality of circumstances test,\(^ {67}\) the Brunner test,\(^ {68}\) and the Bryant poverty test.\(^ {69}\) The Brunner test is the most widely embraced of the four,\(^ {70}\) the Third, Seventh, and Ninth Circuits adopted it directly, while the Fifth, Sixth, Tenth, and Eleventh use it to varying degrees.\(^ {71}\) The three-part Brunner test is:

(1) [T]hat the debtor cannot maintain, based on current income and expenses, a “minimal” standard of living for herself and her dependents if forced to repay the loans; (2) that additional circumstances exist indicating that this state of affairs is likely


\(^{66}\) In re Johnson, 5 Bankr. Ct. Dec. 532, 59–60 (Bankr. E.D. Pa. 1979) (applying a three-contingent-part mechanical, good faith, and policy test). At its most basic, the test asks: will the debtor be able to repay the loan when balanced with living expenses? Was the debtor negligent or irresponsible with financial planning? If yes, would a theoretical lack of negligence or irresponsibility alter the first (mechanical) question? Finally, is it clear the debtor is undergoing bankruptcy proceedings solely to discharge student loan debt or has the debtor clearly benefitted from the education? \textit{Id.}

\(^{67}\) Andrews v. S.D. Student Loan Assistance Corp., 661 F.2d 702 (8th Cir. 1981) (vacating and remanding for further fact-finding).


\(^{69}\) Bryant v. Pa. Higher Educ. Assistance Agency, 72 B.R. 913, 915 (Bankr. E.D. Pa. 1987) (proposing a test “to analyze the income and resources of the debtor and his dependents in relation to federal poverty guidelines”). The district court stated the easy application, definite objectivity, and use of an existing federal benchmark would eliminate the need for complex totality-of-circumstances analyses in all but the most unusual scenarios. \textit{Id.} at 915–18. The district court felt judges should avoid moral adjudication on others’ finances whenever possible. \textit{Id.} at 918.

\(^{70}\) Cloud & Fossey, \textit{supra} note 8, at 479.

\(^{71}\) \textit{Id.}
as if the underlying complexity of the doctrine were not enough, undue hardship discharge determinations also must be filed as an adversary proceeding—effectively a small-scale litigation within the ongoing bankruptcy proceeding. This is an expensive proceeding with a high risk of losing. The irony of the discharge procedure is that those suffering legitimate undue hardship are the least likely to be able to afford adequate representation necessary for success in adversarial litigation contexts.

For better or worse, federal student loans have become an integral part of the United States’ educational system, with over two-thirds of higher education enrollees depending on loans to pay for some portion of their education. In recent years, the numbers of student borrowers, the size of loans, and the respective portion of household debt, have all risen precipitously. From 2004 to 2012, outstanding loans increased nearly three-fold to reach $966 billion, with a 70% escalation in the number of loans over the same time period. Presently, federal student loans exceed $1 trillion. Scholars postulate many different reasons for the recent loan surge, including

72. Brunner, 831 F.2d at 396.
73. Fed. R. Bankr. P. 7001(6); Pardo & Lacey, supra note 21, at 188.
75. Id. at 211–12.
77. Lee, supra note 6, at 7 (since 2008, student loans have surpassed home equity lines of credit, auto loans, and credit as a leading share of American debt second only to home mortgages).
78. Id. at 9. This number continues to rise. Chopra, supra note 22.
79. Lee, supra note 6, at 9.
81. Id. Lee suggests increases in higher education matriculants, parental loans on behalf of students, longer time-to-completion of programs, common deferment of payments, and the
after-effects of the 2008–09 economic recession. It is unclear what ultimate repercussions will result from America’s continued and increased reliance on student loans. Emerging trends, however, are not positive: as loans surge, so does the percentage of debtors behind on payments. Further, when examining only loans ripe for repayment, i.e., excluding loans not yet due, over 30% of loans are delinquent. The historic discharge rate for federal student loans is quite low, but if 30% of borrowers are genuinely unable to repay, this may increase discharge rates causing billions of dollars in losses to the programs.

II. ANALYSIS

A. Undue Hardship

Scholars often critique federal student loans because section 523(a)(8) of the Bankruptcy Code—the undue hardship standard for discharge—creates uncertainty and generally sets such a high bar that it deters those facing genuine hardship from requesting discharge. Despite frequent criticism and a lack of evidence of inability to discharge all contributed to the rise of student loan debt in the 2000s. Lee, supra note 6.

82. Recession-based effects may include unemployed individuals unable to make loan payments and students postponing entering the job market, instead attending more advanced school and acquiring additional loan debt. Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 469, 493.
83. Lee, supra note 6, at 11 (summarizing 2004–12 data showing student loan delinquency—ninety days late—increasing across all age group from less than 10% to 17%).
84. Id. at 15. Additionally, as of September 2014, an estimated $103 billion of over $1 trillion debt was in default. Federal Student Loans, supra note 80, at 1.
86. Lee, supra note 77 at 15. To be clear, Lee’s presentation does not suggest 30% of loan holders would rise to the level of undue hardship, as required for bankruptcy discharge. In fact, the challenging undue hardship standard is a major hurdle. Fossey, supra note 65, at 34 (discussing the difficulty of the standard).
87. Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 468 (noting approximately $1.2 trillion of outstanding federal student loan debt; a 30% discharge in bankruptcy proceedings would therefore represent $360 billion).
89. See supra note 45.
90. Pardo, supra note 21, at 190–91.
student loan abuse, the standard persists.\footnote{Kosol, supra note 85, at 462 ($17 million was discharged from 1969 to 1975, which was a minute fraction of the total $7 billion outstanding at the time).} Academics and scholars nearly all support abolishing the undue hardship standard.\footnote{See, e.g., Pardo, supra note 21, at 235; Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 497.} Given that discharge rates are currently low, however, this change would impact only a small portion of loans—those owed by debtors entering bankruptcy—leaving most debtors unaffected.\footnote{Pardo & Lacey, supra note 21, at 181. A recent General Accounting Office study established that the discharge rate was less than 1% of all federal loans issued. Id.} If loan discharge became more commonplace, however, debtors would default \emph{en masse} and federal taxpayers would bear education costs. Fear of this sort of loan program collapse led to the initial undue hardship standard and its subsequent expansions.\footnote{Cloud & Fossey, supra note 8, at 477–78 (describing the impression in Congress that student loan holders might attempt to defraud taxpayers through loan discharge).}

\section*{B. Education Cost}

The next two issues weighing on student loans, higher education cost and loan availability, present a chicken-and-egg style dilemma because they appear intractably intertwined. Does increasing higher education cost lead to escalating loan usage, or does loan access drive up tuition and associated spending? Colleges and universities have lined up largely in support of the former assertion\footnote{Colleges suggest several reasons, exclusive of loan availability, why tuition has increased dramatically, including: “new demands by parents and students for computers and other expensive amenities, increased competition for a shrinking pool of college-age students, expanded efforts to diversify the student body, higher financial-aid costs borne by colleges and universities, heightened competition for quality faculty,” necessary systems upgrades, and a perception that price is directly proportional with quality. R. Paul Guerre, \textit{Financial Aid in Higher Education: What's Wrong, Who's Being Hurt, What's Being Done}, 17 J.C. & U.L. 483, 486–87 (1991). Governmental changes, including reduced public education funding and tax code changes (diminishing charitable giving), may also increase funding reliance on tuition revenues. \textit{Id.} at 488. Other scholars use an economic framework to explain that tuition is not driven by loans: they say the market for education is inelastic because increasing numbers of people are going to college while the spots at the best and most expensive schools have not increased, keeping demand constant and incentivizing schools to raise prices. William S. Howard, \textit{The Student Loan Crisis and the Race to Princeton Law School}, 7 J.L. ECON. & POLY 485, 496–97 (2011). Furthermore, scholars indicate inelasticity exists because education is a luxury good, institutions are driven to improve national rankings by spending money on ranking factors, the education sector is not a free market because of heavy regulation, for example.} while many other
Observers point to the latter. Both sides acknowledge inelastic education demand, i.e., students attending regardless of cost, but draw different conclusions about why it exists. The case for examining higher education as a luxury good and thereby tuition driving loans is particularly compelling. The most expensive and prestigious schools derive value by providing social status, excellent career opportunities, and significant networking. To maintain their effectiveness as opportunity generators, they must remain exclusive (largely to attract lucrative employers), and exclusivity ensures consistent, unwavering demand regardless of price. Where race, gender, or last name once served a gatekeeping function into the highest ranks of society, now a handful of exclusive degrees from America’s best institutions serve the same purpose. The tremendous social and personal advantages conferred by such degrees make them luxury goods with virtually no limit to what they charge students. Federal research tentatively points in the other direction—to loan availability as spurring higher tuition. One economic interpretation implies inelastic education demand (and the resulting price insensitivity) results from delayed payment for education thanks to loans. Roots, supra note 5, at 505–06. As a result, colleges raise prices because they are able to do so without dampening attendance. Additionally, while colleges avoid framing tuition increases as a consequence of loan availability, one college leader directly told a congressional committee federal loans led to growing tuition. Id. at 507–08. Anecdotally, “[i]n the 1990’s, when Republicans in Congress threatened to enact tuition cost controls if schools did not rein in costs, tuitions immediately began to rise more moderately.” Id. A congressional threat to loans and subsequent moderation of tuition ostensibly demonstrates that loans drive tuition and not vice versa. Further, although some argue decreased state funding led to more loan-funded tuition, one scholar asserts state de-funding of education occurred because states saw federal student loans as a method to off-board state expenses. Id. at 505.

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97. See supra notes 95–96.

98. Howard, supra note 95, at 497–98.

99. Id.

100. Id. at 498–99.

101. Id. at 498.

102. Id. at 497–98. Ironically, the most prestigious institutions, for example Harvard, charge some of the highest tuitions despite having large endowments and a great ability to leverage institutional resources to reduce student expenses. See generally Harvard at a Glance, HARV. U., http://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance (last visited Nov. 17, 2016) (total undergraduate cost of $63,025 for 2016–17, an endowment of $37.6 billion in 2015, and over 55% of undergraduates receive scholarships averaging $50,000).

103. The Congressional Research Service conducted a literature review but said it could
federal agency found increases in federal student aid precipitated increases in tuition by schools relying most on this aid for revenue,\textsuperscript{104} while another study by a different agency was inconclusive.\textsuperscript{105}

Regardless of whether tuition growth propels federal student loan growth or the converse is true, the interrelatedness yields many solutions attacking one variable to limit the other. Some directly regulate tuition, including: paying for public education,\textsuperscript{106} capping tuition,\textsuperscript{107} imposing progressive tuition rates,\textsuperscript{108} and creating a public school pre-paid model.\textsuperscript{109} Paying for public education presents several challenges: by implication it excludes funding private schools, it is costly to undertake,\textsuperscript{110} and it would be difficult to prevent states from decreasing their own funding of higher education, as allegedly occurred in response to past increases in federal loans.\textsuperscript{111} Further, the administration of free public education would be inequitable across the country, as differing states fund their higher education in different ways.
education systems at different rates, charge different amounts of tuition, and are not of uniform academic quality. Capping tuition would also be difficult because it is not clear if the federal government has the power to cap tuition unilaterally.\(^{112}\) Even if capping tuition among public schools were feasible, this would not extend to private institutions, which provide about one quarter of all higher education.\(^{113}\) Several states created a feasible pre-paid model,\(^{114}\) whereby patents contribute to a state investment program to grow contributions for future use at a public school.\(^{115}\) Pre-paid programs, however, most advantage middle-class families who have the knowledge, foresight, and income to join the program far in advance of a child going to college.\(^{116}\) Pre-paid programs do little to help low-income students who lack awareness and the financial ability to reduce their future loan debt.

C. Education Financing

Instead of modifying tuition, altering the structure of loans would directly impact loans themselves and could act as a check on education costs. Proposals range from modest limits on loan interest rates\(^{117}\) to extreme abolition of federal loans altogether.\(^{118}\) Logically, limiting interest, and thereby reducing (the interest portion of) loan payments, does not provide any meaningful check on the education

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112. Strand, supra note 5, at 300 (public education is within the purview of the states, not the federal government).
114. Guerre, supra note 95, at 524.
115. Id. at 524–28.
116. Id. at 524.
117. The New College Compact, supra note 106 (proposing to “[s]ignificantly cut the interest rate on student loans”).
system that perpetuates rising loan balances because it does not
directly affect tuition. One positive aspect of lowering interest rates is
that it is politically feasible, evidenced by regular lowering in the
past; rates ebb and flow depending on the political climate of any
given Congress. \(^{119}\)

Completely eliminating loans would certainly get the attention of
stakeholders who control tuition, but might fall short of the American
ideal of equal access to higher education. It is unclear what
mechanisms, if any, would exist in place of federal loans to finance
college expenses. Opportunistic predatory lenders might fill the
lending space, preying on vulnerable, unsophisticated students. Then
again, if this reform were coupled with loosening of bankruptcy
standards, students who were taken advantage of could escape from
predatory loans, leading to self-policing by the industry to preserve
their business. This is but one imagined scenario in the absence of
federal student loans.

Colleges and universities faced with the loss of billions of dollars
of federal student loan money could tighten budgets dramatically—to
reduce tuition—or find alternate sources of funding. Schools with
great fundraising power and large endowments could tap these
resources, while others could solicit local businesses to defray
education costs in exchange for closely aligning student
competencies with those businesses’ workforce needs. Student
amenities, such as climbing walls, bowling alleys, free music
concerts, and frequently remodeled dormitories, might disappear as
colleges focus on their core mission: educating students in the
classroom. Schools might enter the student loan market, originating
loans themselves. Lending by colleges, were it ever to occur, would
pressure the institutions to produce graduates capable of paying
student loans because graduates incapable of repaying their loans
would thereby reduce the school’s revenue (from payments on loans).
This is an incentive colleges do not currently have because the
federal government is the lender and thus bears the cost when loans
go unpaid. \textit{Arguendo}, schools with high fixed costs, little cash flow,
and high defaults on their self-originated student loans would not

\(^{119}\) \textit{Historical Interest Rates}, \textit{FINAID}, \url{http://www.finaid.org/loans/historicalrates.phtml}
(demonstrating multitudinous interest rate changes over nearly two decades).
survive in a system without federal loans. Ostensibly, the education market would stabilize as adaptive schools would persist and take the place of perished schools unable to endure without federal student loans.

Complete elimination of student lending is fraught with issues, despite its potential benefits. Chiefly, it may run counter to the American ideal of equal opportunity education. Tuition and other costs may remain high, and without publicly available loans the poor and disadvantaged may be priced out of higher education. Similarly, alternative funding sources may not appear, or may not be abundant enough to offset the loss of federal loans, reducing access to education. Additionally, due to cost constraints, the education market may shrink too much, reducing our national capacity to educate students desirous of the improved lifetime earnings and other benefits of education. Instead of improving educational opportunity, complete removal of federal student loans could potentially decrease access to higher education by reducing supply.

III. PROPOSAL

A reasoned middle ground between the narrowness of interest rate reductions and the austerity of loan elimination seems the best path forward. I propose limiting federal student loan borrowing to the seventy-fifth percentile of national average college costs. Schools wanting students to borrow more than this amount in loans would need to petition the federal government and prove that their institution provides “exceptional value” through employment statistics, high admissions to graduate school, or some other clearly quantifiable metric. The seventy-fifth percentile benchmark would not have any allowable annual growth, but it would automatically adjust upward for inflation. The same concept could easily be applied to graduate and professional school loans.

121. In practice, there would be several different seventy-fifth percentiles grouped by similarly situated programs. Each percentile would be determined by comparing costs amongst higher education degrees of similar duration, accreditation, and scope.
This plan strikes the right balance on several accounts. First, its present-day impact on schools is relatively minimal. By definition, 75% of schools would have students who could borrow the maximum cost of their education from the federal government. The schools in the upper 25%, which—beyond being expensive—are largely prestigious, have endowments, wealthy donors, and histories of generous private need-based grants. Prestige and its accompanying resources usually beget high employment and other characteristics that might demonstrate “exceptional value.” Further, with strong financial resources they can replace lost loans with other funds. A funding shift may be wholly unnecessary, however, because prestigious schools already provide many grants to poor entrants, and the wealthier matriculants are unlikely to utilize any loans.

Favorably, the seventy-fifth percentile cut-off would disadvantage high-priced schools lacking “exceptional value,” for example, many private, for-profit schools. Private, for-profit colleges are the scourges of higher education because of poor unemployment outcomes and extremely high student loan default rates. For-profits’ tuition costs also run significantly higher than other undergraduate tuition costs—nearly five times the cost of two-year

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123. Ivy League and peer schools often claim to meet all of a student’s financial needs through grants. See, e.g., How Aid Works, HARV. C. GRIFFIN FIN. AID OFF., https://college.harvard.edu/financial-aid/how-aid-works.


public colleges and over 50% more than four-year public colleges. Tamping down students’ ability to borrow to attend for-profits could lead to a decline in the industry or to a renewed focus by for-profits to provide lower-cost, higher-quality education.

The biggest benefit of this approach may not be immediate. Admittedly, a seventy-fifth percentile cap on costs would at first affect 25% of schools, and even fewer when accounting for schools where borrowers are not taking maximum loans. However, limiting education expense growth only to inflation reins in all future cost increases. Whereas current loan amounts are virtually unlimited, the seventy-fifth percentile benchmark would prevent loan borrowing from outpacing inflation. This would be a warning to high-cost schools that students may follow full-expense-coverage loans to cheaper schools if they do not tamp down costs. Notably, schools retain complete autonomy; a high-priced school might keep prices high and offer no alternative student funding to offset loan losses. Alternatively, it might build its own private loan infrastructure to lend directly to students needing more loans. Scholarships and grants—need-based or merit-based—can continue to be used to offset the cost of education. Ultimately, this proposal strikes a balance between preserving short-term stability and the status quo while ensuring long-term economic viability of federal student loans.

IV. CONCLUSION

Federal loans got their start during the space race to improve math and science talent pipelines. In the mid-1960s, loans were expanded for the poorest individuals who could not attend college without financial assistance. Congress continued to expand loans in

127. See supra note 23 and accompanying text.
128. See supra note 26 and accompanying text.
the following decades, leading to loan balances nearly doubling or tripling after each expansion.\textsuperscript{129} into the 1990s.\textsuperscript{130}

American students are accumulating more and more loan debt at a rapid pace as a result of this expansion. Total national student loan debt now stands at over $1.2 trillion.\textsuperscript{131} Student loans are now the second largest source of household debt, behind only home mortgages.\textsuperscript{132} There is no evidence that this trend of upward costs will be reversed.\textsuperscript{133}

The growth in loans has brought with it an increasing percentage of debtors in default or behind on payments.\textsuperscript{134} However, section 523(a)(8) of the United States Bankruptcy Code allows discharge of student loans in bankruptcy only if the student can demonstrate an undue hardship.\textsuperscript{135} The greatest irritation with undue hardship is that it is an undefined term,\textsuperscript{136} creating uncertainty for debtors who consequently do not even attempt student loan discharge. Today, four different definitions of undue hardship persist in various localities around the country: the Johnson test,\textsuperscript{137} the totality of circumstances test,\textsuperscript{138} the Brunner test,\textsuperscript{139} and the Bryant poverty test.\textsuperscript{140} The lack of a unanimous definition causes wide judicial latitude and inconsistent decisions.

Action must be taken to reform student loans so they continue to be a source of economic good and not a woe in our economy. Rethinking federal student loans also helps ensure America stays true to its core value of equal opportunity education. Loan-based

\textsuperscript{129}. \textit{See supra} notes 27–32 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{130}. \textit{See supra} notes 33–37 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{131}. \textit{Chopra}, \textit{supra} note 22.
\textsuperscript{132}. \textit{See supra} note 6 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{133}. \textit{See supra} notes 4–5 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{134}. \textit{See supra} notes 83–84 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{135}. 11 U.S.C. § 523(a)(8); \textit{Kratzke}, \textit{supra} note 46 (a heightened standard compared to other debts in bankruptcy). \textit{See also supra} notes 49–57 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{138}. \textit{See Andrews v. S.D. Student Loan Assistance Corp.}, 661 F.2d 702 (8th Cir. 1981); \textit{supra} text accompanying note 67.
\textsuperscript{139}. \textit{See supra} text accompanying note 72.
\textsuperscript{140}. \textit{In re Johnson}, 5 Bankr. Ct. Dec. 532 (applying a three-contingent-part mechanical, good faith, and policy test).
alternatives include reducing interest rates and eliminating federal student loans. Prior tuition proposals take a variety of forms, including complete public funding of public education, capping tuition, imposing progressive tuition rates, and creating a public school pre-paid model.

This Note proposes to improve the student debt crisis in America by capping loans to a seventy-fifth percentile benchmark. The benchmark would not have any allowable growth over time but would increase only to keep pace with inflation. This plan would allow most schools to operate with relatively minimal impact while curbing the most expensive, generally prestigious, highly-endowed schools that already are in a better position to provide grants and other funding to their students unless they can demonstrate “exceptional value.” Ultimately, this would prevent loan borrowing from outpacing inflation and encourage schools to reduce costs while allowing schools to maintain their autonomy. It is an ideal plan, balanced between preserving short-term stability within the status quo and ensuring long-term economic viability of federal student loans.

141. See supra note 117.
142. See supra note 106.
143. See supra note 107.
144. See supra note 108.
145. See supra note 109 and accompanying text.