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MSU (Montana State University) Education Policy Forum

Max S. Baucus

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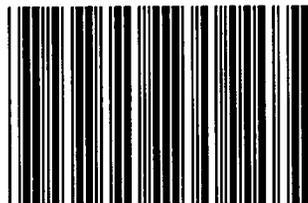
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Remarks to MSU Education Policy Forum

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BAUCUS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

Senator Max Baucus Remarks to MSU Education Policy Forum November 15, 1995 - Via Telephone Conference Call

Education is more important than ever. If you want a career in our high-paying new industries like computers and environmental technology, a college degree is a big help. If you want to succeed in traditional fields like agriculture, forestry and mining, you better understand chemistry, biology, forest ecology and geology.

But college is harder to afford all the time. University tuition is rising about 6 percent every year. The average tuition at a public school in Montana is almost \$3,000. That's before books, housing and food. At the same time, wages for working families are holding even at best. Montana incomes rose just 1 percent last year. This is a real problem.

Put it together, and ordinary folks are caught in a squeeze. Rich families can afford the tuition. But poorer folks and the middle-class are finding it increasingly difficult to realize the dream of a higher education, and the jobs that follow.

Unfortunately, the budget the new Congress – led by Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole - is trying to pass will make it even tougher. To give credit where credit is due, it does include a small tax deduction for college tuition. I support that.

But in most cases it does the opposite. It tells Montana students to pay more for college. For a lot of working Montana families it puts education out of reach.

Over 31,000 students at Montana's institutions of higher learning receive almost \$95 million in federal student assistance. 6,500 MSU students receive loans and grants totalling about \$25 million. Nationwide, 75 percent of all student financial assistance comes from the federal government.

If the Gingrich-Dole budget passes in its present form, we're looking at a \$600 million cut in Pell Grants, adding insult to injury the House is proposing increasing the minimum Pell award from \$400 to \$600.

That means if you are a student from Belgrade, Livingston, Columbus or anywhere in Montana or our country, who currently needs that \$400 in order to stay at Montana State University or another school in our state, you'll be – sadly – out of luck.

But you won't be alone. There are 280,000 students nationwide would see their grants eliminated, as well.

Perkins Loans and Federal Work Study Programs are critical for middle class families and provide almost \$5.3 million for Montana students. The House plans to eliminate this program.

Earlier versions were even worse. One proposal was to eliminate direct lending to students. Another was to impose a new tax on colleges, universities and vocational schools which would have been passed along to students. And another wrong-headed idea was to abolish the six-month student loan grace period after graduation, and made graduates start paying out interest immediately.

None of that has to happen. The Congress wants a budget that includes a big tax break, some of which is good, but most of which goes to profitable companies and individuals who are already well off. They're also spending about \$8 billion on weapons that the armed services have previously rejected.

So there is a lot of waste and unnecessary giveaways in their budget. If they would scale it back, we could restore a lot of our investment in college education.

That's where we ought to go. But right now we're in a deadlock, and we need some folks with common sense to break it up.

That's what I'd like to do today. So now I'd like to hear what you are thinking, and see if we can put our heads together and find a way to set things straight in Washington.