

NEW INITIATIVE

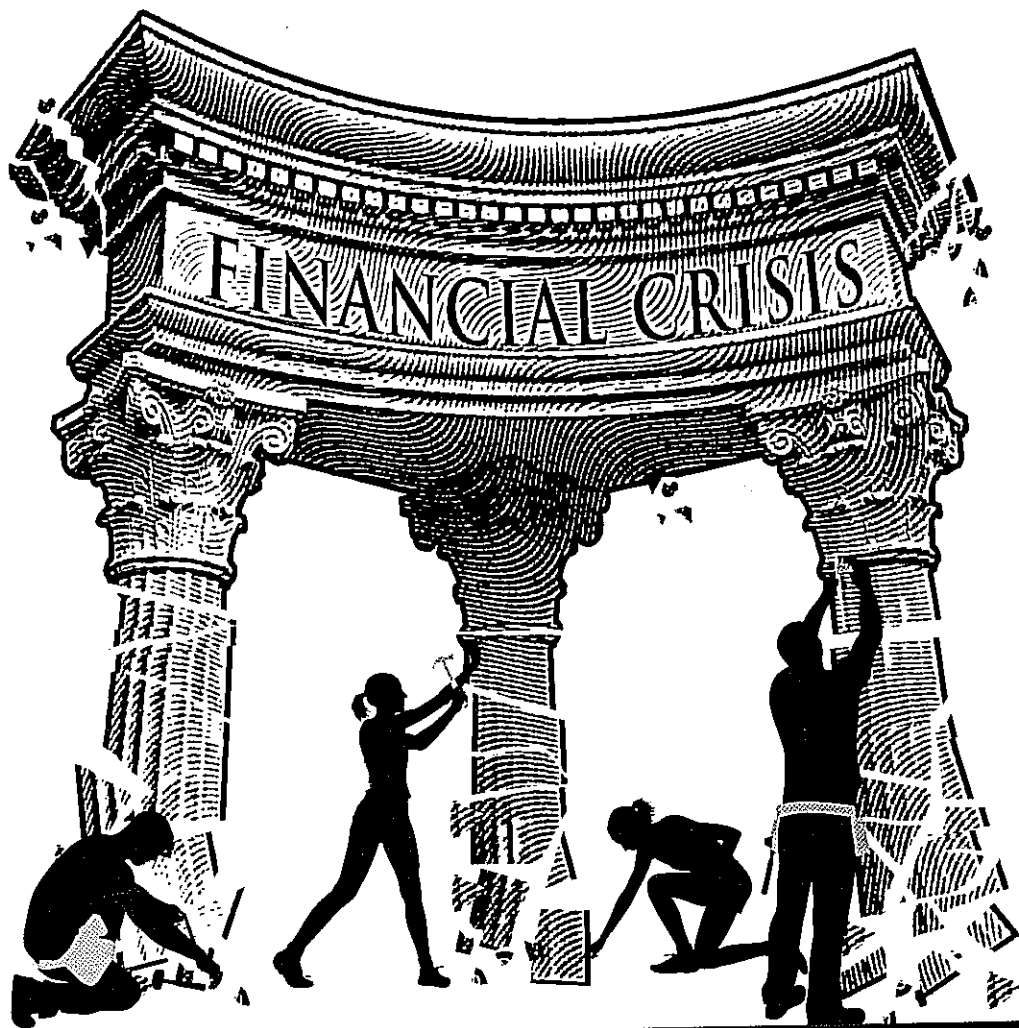
AIMS TO TEACH, ENGAGE STUDENTS IN AVERTING U.S. FISCAL CRISIS

by Andrew L. Yarrow

America's vision for education has always been not only to cultivate knowledge, critical thinking, and skills for work and life, but also to become good citizens, engaged in ensuring a better nation and world. Yet the country's future is clouded by a rapidly rising national debt of \$9.8 trillion (excluding another \$50 trillion in unfunded federal liabilities, and whatever fallout may ensue from the current financial upheavals), with many repercussions that are not yet obvious to most college students or the American public. Restoring America's fiscal sanity is not just about entitlement, health-care reform, tax, budget and political reform; it is, most importantly, about redressing the moral travesty of saddling young Americans with trillions of dollars of debt, as well as preventing economic calamity for future generations.

To make college students aware of the issues, a national initiative, "Students Face up to the Nation's Finances," organized by Public Agenda and funded by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, was launched this fall. The initiative, designed to engage college students in learning and dialogue about the nature, causes, and potential consequences of our looming fiscal crisis, seeks to reach hundreds of campuses over the next few years. The goal is to educate and energize many of America's 16 million college students, and help make their voices heard on this critical set of issues.

Part of the effort will focus on AASCU institutions, through a partnership between Public Agenda and AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP). The American Democracy Project and Public Agenda have created a new ADP initiative on fiscal



responsibility, entitled "America's Future: Protecting the Fiscal Health of our Democracy." Nine AASCU campuses are involved, each serving as a development laboratory for designing strategies and programs that can be used by all AASCU institutions to educate college students about our national fiscal crisis. The nine participating campuses are: Dalton State College (Ga.); Emporia State University (Kan.); Fort Lewis College (Colo.); Keene State University (N.H.); Lyndon State College (Vt.); Stephen F. Austin State University (Texas); The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey; University of North Carolina, Charlotte; and the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez.

Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization, is providing a package of integrated, sophisticated learning and student-engagement materials that includes readings, films, a slide presentation, Web links, questionnaires and student discussion guides on issues such as Medicare, Medicaid and Health-Care Reform; the Aging Population and Social Security; Government Accountability; and Revenues and Tax Policy. There is also an assignment and contest for students to submit essays, videos and other digital products not only to their professors, but also online to Public Agenda. These student submissions will be published online and in print, and disseminated to our nation's leaders, media and others. The materials, which can be accessed at www.facingup.org/faculty and used at no charge, can be adopted as mini-courses within existing classes or used as the nucleus for more ambitious campus-wide efforts.

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The AASCU – Public Agenda project began in September 2008 with a meeting in Washington, D.C. for the nine participating campuses. Work on the campuses this year will be showcased at the ADP National Meeting in Baltimore in June 2009. This September's initial planning session included ideas to create multiple courses, student web pages, interaction with elected officials, peer-to-peer learning projects, K-12 teacher education, and multiple cross-disciplinary programs involving politics, economics and history classes.

During spring 2008 pilot tests of the larger Public Agenda project, students generally began with relatively little knowledge and only modest concern about federal debt. However, after enthusiastically engaging with the issues, they concluded that concerted, urgent action is needed by national leaders and by citizens, and that educating more students and the public is critical. Students also suggested specific potential policies to redress the nation's growing fiscal imbalances.

As one student said: "Prior to this discussion in class, I was extremely uneducated about the national debt. . . I do not understand how this huge problem which is going to face future generations continues to be pushed under the carpet. . . Through this exercise, I have learned a lot about the budget of our country and a problem with a big name—debt. Education started here, so we should now move to the next step of active involvement and change."

Many expressed a mixture of outrage and fears about the nation's fiscal condition, particularly as it related to their generation.

"As a 20-year-old citizen, it troubles me that I may be faced with the burden of paying for my government's mistakes," another student said. "It's a terrible thought, knowing that my government isn't planning ahead for my future and because of that, my generation will have to pay for mistakes made before we were even able to vote."

While the America's Future initiative currently involves only nine AASCU campuses, all AASCU institutions are urged to use the materials created by the larger national initiative, "Students Face Up to the Nation's Finances." Faculty or students can have access to the repository of materials by simply registering at www.facingup.org/faculty.

*Andrew L. Yarrow, vice president and Washington director of Public Agenda, is the author of the new book *Forgive Us Our Debts: The Intergenerational Dangers of Fiscal Irresponsibility* (Yale University Press, 2008), and project director for "Students Face Up to the Nation's Finances."*

Selected Readings on Federal Fiscal Issues

- **Andrew L. Yarrow, *Forgive Us Our Debts: The Intergenerational Dangers of Fiscal Irresponsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)**
- **Scott Bittle and Jean Johnson, *Where Does the Money Go?: Your Guided Tour to the Federal Budget Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008)**
- **Peter G. Peterson Foundation, *The State of the Union's Finances* (2008)**
- **Alice Rivlin and Isabel Sawhill, eds., *Restoring Fiscal Sanity 2005* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2005)**

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