



# CAMPUS ELECTION ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

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## HOW CAMPUSES CAN TALK ABOUT THE PROPOSED FEDERAL BUDGET

Federal budgets reflect our nation's priorities and values. As such, they've often been called moral documents. They're always important, but don't typically embody the level of shifts in decades of U.S. programs and policies that we're seeing in President Trump's proposed budget. Congress will inevitably change specific allocations, but the degree to which our representatives accept, reject, or revise Trump's road map will affect every community in the country. This makes the budget's release a major teachable moment for helping students explore the appropriate role of our federal government and how it allocates common resources. But it will only become such if colleges consciously make it the focal point of systematic reflection. So we want to help students think critically about the choices being debated, whichever elements they agree or disagree with.

**How do schools facilitate discussion and reflection about the budget?** We've created this resource to provide some starting points, framing questions, and ways to bring the conversation into specific disciplines. You can start by having students read about the specific reallocation of financial resources proposed in the new budget. The [Los Angeles Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), and [Fox News](#) all have straightforward descriptions that allow students to see the budget's impact on major policies and programs, and to begin to explore how the changes will affect our country and specific communities. Your regional paper may also have breakdowns of potential local impact. We'd suggest you distribute this resource and its links to faculty in every possible discipline, so they can help their students explore the implications through the lens of their subject matter. You can also distribute it to your campus newspaper, to interested student organizations, and to students participating in community service programs. You could also conduct general forums or discussions in residence halls.

### **You might begin with two general questions:**

- What kinds of common needs should be met by the federal government and what kinds should be left to the states, the private sector, or to private individuals?
- Which needs should the federal government make a higher priority within its discretionary budgets?

### **You can then look at the overall shifts in priorities and some specific salient shifts that your students may be following. For instance:**

- The defense budget, the world's largest, would increase by \$50 billion, with more modest separate increases to veteran's programs and Homeland Security. Most domestic programs are commensurately decreased to compensate. Do you agree with these shifts? Why or why not? Are there aspects of the military and national security budgets that seem more or less essential than others?
- Should the federal government end its longstanding support for efforts like the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Legal

Services, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, as this budget does? Why or why not?

- This budget cuts Environmental Protection Agency funding by nearly a third, reflecting a stated belief that its regulations are a needless economic drain. It also ends much support for climate change research, considering it a waste of taxpayer money. Do you support this shift? Why or why not?

Students will inevitably have differing responses. But the budget lets them explore and potentially weigh in on critical national choices. **The goal should be conversations in every discipline, not just political science, sociology, or government, and particularized when possible with examples from their experience and from your local community.** Here are some possible discipline-specific examples:

- Allied health and psychology courses: Explore the Affordable Care Act and its Republican alternative through the links below, and the role of public investment in medical research and support for community health, mental health, and substance abuse programs. Explore the arguments around the major cuts to the National Institutes of Health. Examine the general impact of the budget's changes on the physical and mental health of affected communities.
- Business and Economics courses: Talk about which economic sectors gain and lose with this budget, and what kinds of public investments are necessary to grow a strong economy.
- Communications classes: Discuss whether media outlets like Public Broadcasting should be supported with public funds. Look at other related issues, from the appropriate role of the media to debates over "alternative facts."
- Criminology and law enforcement classes: Explore issues like immigration policy, the border wall, and the impact of cuts in youth employment and after school programs.
- Education courses: Discuss education impacts, including general cuts, elimination of funding for before- and after-school and summer programs, and a \$1.4 billion increase for a combination of public charters and private school choice voucher programs.
- English, Composition, and Rhetoric classes: Examine the arguments and stories being used by both sides to describe the contending proposals.
- International Studies classes: Evaluate the role of US foreign aid programs and of "soft power" vs "hard power."
- Math and statistics classes: Examine the numbers justifying the expansion or contraction of particular programs.
- Science, engineering, and technology courses: Debate the value of public investment in the sciences, the role of technology in defense budget increases, and how to approach issues like climate change.

You could also get creative, for instance, by having criminal justice and sociology classes team up to examine immigration issues (including the proposed building of the Mexico wall), or art classes and economics classes examine the economic impact of the arts. Participating classes can reach a broader audience by creating public presentations at public forums or for the campus newspaper and allied social media sites.

Your students will likely disagree on many elements of the budget, and you may need to bend over backwards to be supportive of those who may be in the minority (including conservative students in liberal environments, and liberal students in conservative environments). **But**

**whatever their responses, discussion is key. You want them talking, researching, and reflecting, arguing the pros and cons of the choices presented.** The more you can help them engage in civil and respectful ways, the more they can take these approaches into the broader public sphere.

You can also help students examine assumptions behind their particular responses. Why do they believe what they do about how our government should allocate resources? What aspects of their personal history or media habits have shaped their views? Are their beliefs reflexive and automatic or intentionally thought out? Do they know people with significantly differing beliefs? Simply encouraging this kind of reflection may help open them to broader perspectives.

Students can also go beyond learning about the budget to acting on it. Encourage them to call or visit their Senators and Congressional Representatives, attend public hearings, speak out however they can. (Here's a New York Times article [on why phone calls matter](#) and [a concise guide to in-person lobbying](#) from a nonpartisan global hunger project). However your students respond, voicing their perspectives can lead them toward further engagement instead of cynical withdrawal.

You may have other ideas on ways your campus can grapple with the budget's implications. But however your campus community chooses to address it, the choices the budget will precipitate matter profoundly to your students, to their home communities, and to our country's future. We hope you'll take the opportunity to help your campus engage them.

(Note: If you'd like to explore budgets in general, [Brookings](#) has an interactive budget simulator that could work well in classrooms, although it does have an implicit bias in prioritizing debt reduction.)

### AFFORDABLE CARE ACT RESOURCES

Because the potential repeal or replacement of Obama's Affordable Care Act is so consequential, here are some additional resources to begin a discussion on the existing act and its proposed replacement. *Time Magazine* has a good summary from early 2016 of [what Obamacare has and hasn't accomplished](#). *USA Today* has one contrasting the ACA with the Republican replacement alternative, the American Health Care Act. As with the budget, the plan is evolving as its proponents negotiate with House and Senate members whose support they'll need, but *USA Today's* partner, [Factcheck.org](#), will be doing regular updates. NPR has [a good summary of the Congressional Budget Office projection](#) that the current replacement proposal will lead to 24 million fewer people insured by 2026, in part through \$880 billion of Medicaid cuts over ten years, while lowering the cost to the federal deficit by \$337 billion. The most comprehensive coverage of these issues probably comes from [Kaiser Family Foundation](#): Kaiser's resources tend to be policy intensive and detailed, but they have [a useful interactive chart comparing ACA, AHCA, and several other Republican proposals](#) and their allied Kaiser Health News is written in more accessible lay terms. For a comparison of U.S health care funding costs and outcomes with those of other developed countries, see a recent [Commonwealth Fund report](#).

To faculty: We're trying to track how widely this resource gets used, so if you are able to use it in your classroom, we'd greatly appreciate your letting us know through [this brief form](#).