

2016 State of the Union Essay Contest Packet of Winning Essays and Finalists



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Meredith Holbrook (Milton High School, *Senior*)

Second Place

Vivian Huang (South Burlington High School, *Senior*)

Third Place

Ryan Racicot (Milton High School, *Senior*)

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Faryal Afsar (Mount Mansfield Union High School, *Junior*)

Megan Bromley (Milton High School, *Senior*)

Mikayla Clarke (Bellows Falls Union High School, *Senior*)

Maddie Collins (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

Olivier Enwa (Winooski High School, *Senior*)

Adam Fleischman (South Burlington High School, *Senior*)

Ellery Harkness (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

Megan Hughes (Canaan Memorial High School, *Junior*)

Tori Jarvis (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

Alexis Manchester (Green Mountain Technology and Career Center, *Junior*)

Sara Manfredi (Milton High School, *Senior*)

William Martin (Mount Abraham Union High School, *Freshman*)

Hadley Menk (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

Sophia Parker (Vergennes Union High School, *Junior*)

Nick Sears (Vermont Commons School, *Senior*)

Paige Thibault (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Freshman*)

Peter Unger (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Senior*)

Winning Essay:

Meredith Holbrook (Milton High School, *Senior*)

My fellow Americans, today the United States has the strongest military in the world. Our nation has the number one economy. We have the longest running democratic government in history. If we want to be considered the greatest in the world, the home of the free, the land of opportunity, then we must face the challenges before us.

In 2014, 48.1 million Americans lived in food insecure homes, of this, 15.3 million were children. This equates to 14 percent of households being food insecure. How can the wealthiest nation in the world be unable to feed its hungry? We have the full capability of providing for those in need. We should not allow politics to stop us from caring for our citizens in need. It is impossible to expect the people of this country to be functioning members of society without adequate nourishment. The solution to this problem is simple: feed America's hungry. I believe that if we were to create a cabinet level agency dedicated specifically to food-insecurity, we would be bettering the common good of America. Devoting ten billion dollars from the federal budget would make a tremendous improvement in the number of food-insecure homes. It may be a bold move to make, but our nation cannot move forward until our people are no longer hungry.

Alongside hunger is homelessness. On one given night in America, about 560,000 citizens are homeless, and about 200,000 of those people are in families. It should be the basic right of our people to have shelter and security. The wound of homelessness cannot be solved with night time shelters. Homeless people must be provided with long-term shelters if they are ever to be productive members of society. In order to solve this issue, we must invest in job counseling. Many homeless citizens are homeless due to the inability to acquire a job. If people had the chance to have a clean interview outfit, as well as proper interview instruction, there would not be as many people sleeping on the streets. In order to make this happen, we must have more people trained in the expertise of job counseling, and more programs helping to aid homeless citizens. Again, this would mean funding such programs. A small cost to pay to get Americans off the streets.

How a nation treats its elderly says a lot about its character. We will not be a nation that ignores the needs of its senior citizens. Today, many seniors cannot comfortably retire. They are often forced to choose between paying for food or, paying for medication. They will go without heat because they cannot afford to buy fuel. The source of this issue is Social Security. Although this retirement system has benefited many Americans, it needs to be changed. Social Security often does not change with inflation, or does not change enough to account for increased prices. While prices are rising, Social Security is not keeping up. This leaves seniors to make difficult choices regarding spending. Every year, Social Security should be assessed, and changed accordingly to inflation. To pay for this, we would need to raise the Social Security tax percentage to seven percent. This would allow America to adequately pay for the needs of our elderly.

This nation is nowhere near perfect. We have many issues we must address, domestic and foreign. We cannot expect to properly address issues overseas, until we fix the home we live in. We must fix America from within. Once we do this, we will truly be able to call ourselves the greatest nation in the world.

Second Place Essay:

Vivian Huang (South Burlington High School, *Senior*)

The year of 2015 has been historic for the United States of America. We have signed a landmark agreement on climate change, enacted marriage equality, and become economically sound—marking greater economic growth rates than predicted and reaching a five percent unemployment rate. Still, we enter the year of 2016 with two pressing issues remaining on the global and the national scale: terrorism and healthcare. As we tackle these issues, we must remind ourselves that the United States of America is truly one nation, indivisible, with each citizen carrying responsibilities to support our nation's values, as well as one another.

First, following recent acts of terror around the world, it is top-priority for the United States to defeat the threat of ISIS. Enough is enough. Rest assured that rather than sending our troops to combat zones in Iraq and Syria, we will take an active role in helping our European allies lead the battle. America must provide rigorous train-and-assist programs for Kurdish forces, exert a tight grip on ISIS-controlled territory, cut off supply lines, and implore the Gulf States to combat terrorism. Furthermore, previous experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have revealed that merely destroying one source of terrorism will not suffice. To ultimately render counterterrorism and military action unnecessary in Iraq and Syria, we plan on developing political, economic, and educational reforms that will effectively respond to complex sectarian and ethnic divisions in the region.

Let's make it clear that the United States is not declaring a war against religion, but rather against the violence of extremism. As human beings, it is our responsibility to help the innocent Syrian families fleeing ISIS and Assad's brutal regime. Now is not the time to turn our backs, but to provide humanitarian aid and shelter, even though it requires extreme vigilance. Additionally, every American must confront the problem of bigotry, which only becomes exploited by ISIS for its own recruitment. We all have the duty to stand up against discriminatory rhetoric and hostile actions. We all have the duty to uphold the country's values by supporting each other—our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and fellow community members—with tolerance and respect.

Second, an important issue on the domestic front continues to be healthcare. Physical and mental wellness is a fundamental need for the American people. Over the past year, the Affordable Care Act has improved access to this basic human right for the uninsured. However, there is more to accomplish in 2016. Until completely comprehensive universal healthcare—namely, a single-payer system—is set into place, Medicaid must be expanded in 20 remaining states and community health clinics must be placed in underserved locations.

The Department of Health and Human Services must address the chief drivers of healthcare costs; hospital expenditures, physician and clinical services, and skyrocketing drug prices escalate the national health spending. To target this broad problem, a single-payer healthcare system will minimize unnecessary spending by requiring hospitals to operate on government-approved standardized billing procedures. Hence, hospitals and pharmaceutical companies will not be able to overcharge patients and run extortionate monopolies on essential medications.

Indeed, American citizens' rugged bravery, wise judgment, and drive for excellence have made this country great. But we can always progress forward, as long we stand united. Therefore, we will tackle the urgent issues of terrorism and healthcare not only with confidence, but also with the ambition to remain one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Third Place Essay:

Ryan Racicot (Milton High School, *Senior*)

The most pressing and immediate danger of today's society is the rapidly changing climate. The scientific community agrees virtually unanimously, that climate change is a very real and imminent concern. Continuation down the current path at this pace will eventually result in the ultimate demise of the human race.

This issue is not the United States' to tackle alone. In order to fully reverse the effects of climate change, it will take a worldwide collaborative effort unlike anything the world has ever faced before. The United States' role going forward is to set an example for other first world countries. The United Nations' conference this year in Paris was a step in the right direction. But the United States needs to agree to a binding commitment to reduce emissions. Without a whole-hearted promise to abide to these reductions, the United States will not be taken seriously on this issue.

The United States government cannot expect corporations to make eco-friendly movements unprovoked, it is simply not worth the financial burden. The federal government needs to incentivize eco-friendly waste management for businesses, by making eco-friendly business more profitable than environmentally irresponsible business. As it stands now, no company has motivation to protect the environment. Doing so only hurts production and makes them less competitive. To reverse this trend, the federal government needs to enforce pre-existing environmental laws and spend more on environmental saving measures.

To convert all factories to updated standards for emissions, a large amount of money will be needed initially, but over time, a system in which clean energy is valued more than profit will result in a much more sustainable economy. Companies who destroy the environment and experience greater profit as a result will be forced to pay for their own pollution management systems. Greatly increasing taxes on environmentally irresponsible corporations will make clean energy more fiscally appealing than polluting means of energy. This is not stealing money from the American people or a redistribution of wealth. This is using money made by multi-billion dollar companies at the expense of the environment to help fix the problem they themselves helped to create. Also, by taking the charge on creating environmentally friendly products and machinery, the potential for the United States to make a profit is huge. By incentivizing other countries to go eco-friendly, and selling the materials and means to do so creates jobs and income, which boosts the U.S. economy, all without destroying the environment.

Unlike many other issues troubling the state of Vermont, the nation, and the world, climate change affects every single person. Regardless of race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, religion, education or political affiliation, climate change affects all, especially the most disadvantaged. Because of this, it is everyone's personal responsibility to do their part in saving the planet. One cannot stand idle and expect other people do all of the dirty work. Helping to save the earth is not about how you can benefit, it is about how you can help the greater cause. We can no longer allow large corporations to prioritize making a profit over responsible waste management. The short-term profits for the rich are vastly outweighed by the long-term environmental consequences felt by all.

Finalist Essay:

Faryal Afsar (Mount Mansfield Union High School, *Junior*)

”Whoever kills an innocent person it is as if he has killed all humanity”
Quran 5:32.

Being a Muslim girl in the world, I hear many bad things about my religion or my country. Sometimes when people come to know that I’m a Muslim girl they may think that I’m a terrorist, yet I wonder how only 0.03% extremists can represent 1.6 billion people of the world. As a child, I grew up in a loving Muslim family. My parents didn’t even permit us to kill a spider or an ant. I was never told to spread violence in the world. I was never taught in my school or house to be an extremist. In my reading of our holy book, I only found words of wisdom and peace so then why are the extremists labeled as Muslims? How can we say they belong to a certain religious group if they kill innocent people?

As an exchange student from Pakistan coming to Vermont, I was first afraid of coming to a country that may see me as a terrorist since I am a Muslim. I thought I may be bullied or someone would call me a terrorist in school but the love I have received from people here is what I had never imagined. But still when I hear negative news about Muslims or my country on TV or the internet, it hurts me. I want to help people understand Islam and my country. A month ago after the ISIS attacks in Paris, this topic was raised again and political leaders started saying that Muslims shouldn’t be allowed to enter the U.S. I ask, is this really the solution to the terrorist problem? How is it that I have been welcomed so warmly through this exchange program and yet there are those who generalize and state that Muslims are not welcome here?

Each year hundreds of exchange students from the Muslim world come to the U.S and the students and their host families form a special bond. These relationships form strong connections and the memories live forever. Our country’s leaders should look at what we are doing; young people can play just as an important role as our current leaders. We are not spreading any violence; we are trying to know each other. We are humans and we care about each other. It’s not because we’re from the same background or religion. What matters the most is how strongly we are bonded to each other.

The problem of terrorism is not a problem for one country but for the whole world, and the solution to it is not blaming each other and closing boundaries but rather knowing and helping each other. I believe that if people open themselves to new experiences and start knowing each other, the world would be a good place.

Finalist Essay:

Megan Bromley (Milton Senior High School, *Senior*)

My fellow Americans, sometimes overlooked are the basic human rights and needs of the people. While this may entail many topics, I would like to focus on a major issue that has slid under the radar for far too long. The epidemic of rape and sexual assault runs rampant through our country and not much has been done to change this continuing tragedy. Steps may be taken. The first step must address the unprocessed rape kits. Throughout our country there are over 20,000 unprocessed rape kits. Add to this the estimate that 68% of rapes or sexual assaults that occur go unreported. Imagine how large the number of unanalyzed kits there would then be if even 50% more were to be reported. This is a challenging issue and it cannot be solved overnight, however there are steps to take in the right direction aside from moral and ethical obligations.

One solution that could be enforced is a quota, by this I imply that every city must meet a certain number of kits processed in order to get the number of prosecutors facing jail time or other capital punishment inclining. Too many cases go without investigation even after the kit has been used and the victim has been tested, this crime is not fading away and must be faced head on not shied away from due to technical complications that can be entirely avoided. The federal government should follow through with a funded mandate to state and city law enforcement to help them process the kits and create additional lab facilities.

Now, as I have just said the number of people who have committed a sexual assault crime in prison would increase due to the processing of more rape kits, this leads into my next point of discussion-incarceration rates and funding for prisons. 12.7 % of inmates are made up of those who are serving time for drug violations and marijuana expenses. We are pouring millions of dollars into our state and federal prison systems and too much of that is going towards people for up to twenty years for marijuana possession. However I propose to use the funding instead to evaluate something such as unprocessed rape kits and begin to treat minor drug use in a proactive manner. Marijuana possession should be removed as a state and federal crime and result in no jail time. Instead, as a nation we should implement counseling after a three strike policy or enter the convicted into a rehabilitation program if the drug use worsens. Many other countries decriminalized the use and/ or possession of marijuana and they have some of the lowest rates regarding drug use and misdemeanor crimes. Just by reducing incarceration of people convicted of misdemeanor drug crimes, there would be an inclination of money to put forth on other issues at hand, not just processing rape kits. Taking one step at a time towards the issues that are more manageable such as the two I have just discussed is how America can move forward, it doesn't need to be a leap of faith and a tackle at a major issue, one objective at a time culminates for a strong, prosperous country.

Finalist Essay:

Mikayla Clarke (Bellows Falls Union High School, *Senior*)

There are many different issues that the U.S. is facing right now, but one of the most beneficial actions the U.S. could do right now is to legalize marijuana. By legalizing marijuana for recreational and medical uses the country would benefit in many different ways. The crime rate would dramatically decrease, the use of prescription drugs would decrease and the economy would greatly improve.

The economy is not in a great place in the U.S., as we are \$18.7 trillion in debt, and counting. In 2014 the Washington Post wrote that Colorado made \$700 million off of medical and recreational marijuana in the first year it was legal. By legalizing marijuana, many more job opportunities would open and a whole new industry is created. The amount that the whole country would make would be in the billions.

The use of prescription drugs such as painkillers and sleeping pills is greatly increasing. Those pills become addictive and many people use them to get high because they're legal and easy to obtain. Children are given those pills, and they may become addicted at a young age. While there is the ability to overdose on those pills, marijuana is almost impossible to overdose on and brings better relief than prescription drugs. Overdose deaths from prescription pills were significantly reduced in the 23 states that allow medical marijuana. By legalizing marijuana the dispensaries get different strains of marijuana to help people sleep or deal with pain. If it's being used in the medical form the THC can be extracted and the CBD's can be used for the pain. There are many different ways to consume marijuana, such as oils, creams, foods, and smokable. In the U.S. there are over one million people using medical marijuana, yet, it's still not legal in all states.

People all over the country are getting in legal trouble for using and possessing marijuana. Young people are getting criminal records for a non-violent civil offense, and as a result will potentially be not allowed to gain federal student loans or jobs. With our limited police and jail resources, there are more important and harmful substances to focus on. In April of 2014 MSNBC wrote an article, Study: Marijuana Legalization Doesn't Increase Crime, "Even after Colorado legalized the sale of small amounts of marijuana for recreational use on Jan. 1 of this year, violent and property crime rates in the city are actually falling." Since the government is regulating the marijuana, it will be safer. There won't be strands that are laced with other harmful drugs, such as heroin or cocaine. By legalizing marijuana, less people will get arrested for the use and possession.

As a country we should legalize marijuana. First we should start with medical, because medical patients are more important. Then as a country it should be decriminalized. Then, we should legalize recreational. By legalizing marijuana not only will marijuana users benefit, even non-users will benefit.

Finalist Essay:

Maddie Collins (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

The 2008 financial crisis should have paved the way for a new era of banking, for real reform and regulation, for much needed change. The 2008 financial crisis should have forged the path for breaking up the nation's largest banks, but instead the crisis has taken a back seat to other, more heavily broadcasted issues. This back seat position has allowed the same Wall Street bankers who are to blame for the greatest recession since the Great Depression, to yet again be gambling with taxpayer money. In my opinion, it is of utmost importance to regulate our financial institutions in order to hinder their increasing ability to damage the global economy. We must understand that our country and the world as a whole would be devastated if another large bank were to go bankrupt.

In our country there are four banks that hold assets of more than \$1 trillion dollars. The largest, JP Morgan Chase and Company, holds \$1.8 trillion dollars in total assets, the equivalent of 14% of all total assets held by U.S. commercial banks. Comparatively, in 2001, the top asset holder was Bank of America with \$552 billion dollars. This increase is substantial, and will only continue to rise.

The problem with these large banks is that if they were to go unexpectedly bankrupt it would cause rippling effects on the economy, similar to what the world witnessed in 2008 with the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers. To give this some perspective, the Lehman Brothers' total assets were \$600 billion dollars, only one third of JP Morgan Chase and Company's current assets. These banks pose a real threat to the security of our financial system. As described by William C. Dudley, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, there are two big problems with these "too big to fail" banks. First, to combat the threat that they pose, the government intervenes and gives large banks a funding advantage over smaller banks, thus creating an unfair playing field. Secondly, this funding advantage creates incentives for financial firms to become larger and more complex. As the banking system becomes more and more complex, the risks dramatically increase, only furthering the problem.

In a time where our government officials are advocating for the creation of more jobs and placing greater value on small businesses, we need to be more aware of what is best for this type of business. We need smaller, community banks to serve small businesses for they do a better job of fulfilling their credit needs. Unlike with large institutions, community banks allow businesses to receive loans based on their reputation and reliability within the community that they serve, rather than basing it solely on their credit scores.

With a clear perspective and a shift in focus, it is certainly achievable to break up our nation's largest banks and ensure that greed and selfishness are no longer the ruling forces that drive our financial institutions.

Finalist Essay:

Olivier Enwa (Winooski High School, *Senior*)

The country that you and I live in is fantastic and I am really proud of the things we are doing. I would like to address two problems, which are racism and prejudice. Specifically, there are people who are being judged by their skin color or their religion in the United States.

More people of color are being sent to jail than white people. More people of color are also being killed by the police and executed by the judicial system. Bryan Stevenson, a social justice activist, said “I think that every human being falters sometime; no one is perfect. Our mistakes require the mercy and understanding of others, which we can’t legitimately expect unless we offer the same to others”. Innocent people are being killed for nothing. “Why do we want to kill all the broken people?”

The U.S Constitution and the Bill of Rights protect people’s rights, and we have the right to worship any religion. The First Amendment says that everyone in the United States has the right to worship any god or no religion at all. Over the years many Americans have forgotten the First Amendment when they think about Muslims. Innocent Muslims are blamed for things they didn’t do, such as the attack in New York on September 11, 2001.

One cause of hatred against Muslims is the growth of ISIS, which uses Islam as an excuse to kill people and destroy land. Many Americans think that all Muslims are the same as ISIS, which is not true. I have friends who are Muslims and I definitely don’t think they are terrorists. Innocent Muslims are being accused of terrorism and they are sent back to their countries. According to CNN, presidential candidate Donald Trump said that, “the United States should come to a complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” I think that innocent Muslims should be left alone.

Prejudice still exists in this amazing country because I’ve experienced it. One day I went to the store near my house with my friends. When we got there the cashier told us to put our backpacks down. As we were getting the stuff we wanted to buy, the manager came up to us and told us to “get out of my store” even though we hadn’t done anything wrong. I was hurt that he had judged me by my appearance.

Better education in poor parts of the country and the education of police officers will help improve racism in the U.S. The United States should improve education for poor people. Most of the people being killed and put in jail are undereducated people of color. Speaking as a black man from Mozambique, I believe that if education is improved in poorer parts of the country our country will be a better place. Education is the key to everything.

Finalist Essay:

Adam Fleischman (South Burlington High School, *Senior*)

The state of the union is strong. Americans are working hard, unemployment is down, the stock market is up, and the recession of 2008 feels like ancient history. Still, we face problems. Climate change is one of those issues, particularly because of the denial by politicians in our government that refuse to do anything, because their re-election campaigns rely on oil and gas companies' contributions.

In the 114th congress, 170 members deny that global warming is real. Many representatives receive huge donations, as much as \$63 million from big oil and gas companies, and in return, they support deregulation initiatives in Congress to protect the corporations. In other words, they prevent progress and obstruct a move away from non-renewable energy sources. In this way, they are not representing their constituents -- they're representing the interests of the very wealthy corporations -- and it's undermining the political system we have.

In a legislative body that is constantly blinded by the goal of staying in office, rather than passing comprehensive reforms to save our planet, the denial is rampant. Even though 97% of scientists agree that climate change is real, and manmade, these elected officials with no background in science choose to ignore it, and instead put trillions of taxpayer money into a defense budget that is bloated and unnecessary. For climate change to be properly addressed, it starts with Congress. If we invest money into clean energy- solar panels, wind turbines, natural gas - we will slowly be able to move away from non-renewable, dirty sources.

We also must take a stand against the corporations profiting off of non-renewable sources, making it clear that their campaign contributions should not be the difference between whether or not we leave a healthier planet for future generations. If we wait long enough, it will be too late to do anything. It's not part of a "liberal agenda" that some in Congress like to criticize. It's a common problem that is hurting our common home, and it's up to all of humankind to deal with it. That can't happen if the political charades are continued in Washington, D.C.

Finalist Essay:

Ellery Harkness (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

My fellow Americans, there are many important issues burdening our world today; in order to fix these problems, we need an education system that produces well educated leaders to solve these issues. Our education system as it stands today needs to be modified and socioeconomic factors hindering education need to be addressed.

Education should be an equalizer, so that anyone, no matter their circumstances, can realize their potential; this isn't the reality though. The truth is that kids from disadvantaged families have a far lower chance for success. Inequality due to wealth and race are huge problems; the disturbing school to prison pipeline is one outcome of this. Only 1 in 12 children in poverty will graduate from college today and almost half won't graduate from high school. Studies have also found that African American and Hispanic high school graduation rates are 10% lower than the U.S. average. Education can raise people out of poverty, while ignoring these problems only continues to perpetrate a horrific cycle of poverty and create more economic problems.

Consider that by 2020, 65% of U.S. jobs will require a postsecondary education, according to Georgetown Public Policy Institute. Yet only 1 of 4 students are ready for college in the 4 core subjects when graduating high school, according to U.S. news. Regrettably, the education system not only isn't preparing students for college, it also forces students to bear an unreasonable financial burden in order to go to college. With free or reduced tuition programs, college education would be more accessible.

There is no single fix for the educational problems plaguing our country yet it is clear that major reforms need to take place. Potential solutions are policies that provide family support so that students grow up in places that encourage learning. Since teachers are the most important aspect of education, more resources could be put into teacher programs and salaries that incentivize job growth. Congress could also work towards bipartisan policies that ensure schools around the U.S have equal quality and access to resources through more funding. In 2015, 55% of government funding went to the military, while only 6% went to education. An increase in education funding is a justifiable change that could dramatically help broken systems.

With a better educated workforce, people will have better jobs and rely on government less, benefiting the U.S. economy. Opportunity gaps in education would also decrease and the U.S. would become more competitive as a result. This is another incentive for making education a priority to those in Washington.

Our combined futures are dependent on the youth of today; but our nation's children are only as good as the education they are provided with. As Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Let's take advantage of it.

Finalist Essay:

Megan Hughes (Canaan Memorial High School, *Junior*)

As many Americans know, we are very blessed to have colleges available in our country. College allows a young adult to further his or her knowledge of the world around them so they can be ready to enter the workforce. College tuition used to be affordable, so that everyone could further their education. This is important because more educated people means a stronger growing economy. At the same time, the cost of tuition rises dramatically each year, and families with more than one child find themselves in tough financial situations. Most of the time people use loans, and end up paying back student debt for years. Every American deserves to have a college education, which is why state colleges should be tuition free.

Elementary and high school is mandatory for all American citizens. Parents who refuse to send their children to school have to pay large fines or even serve jail time. If early education is this important to Americans, why is college not? Why should the emphasis just be on getting a primary or secondary education? More and more jobs today are requiring higher than just a high school diploma. In an article by Adam Davidson, he says that “Workers with more education are more productive, which makes companies more profitable and the overall economy grow faster.” This is true, more educated people means more jobs are being done correctly and efficiently, and as a result boosting the economy.

In an article by Steven Goodman he said “Two-thirds of American undergraduates are in debt. This year, student loan debt will grow to more than a trillion dollars, outpacing credit card debt for the first time.” This article was written in 2011, meaning only four years ago student debt was already in the trillions. When young adults leave home and enter the work force, they have to deal with adult responsibilities for the first time. On top of that, they usually need to pay off student debt. If college were to be tuition free these people would not have large debts. The money they make could go towards paying bills, and saving money for their future or retirement. It would also help attract those who were never thinking about going to college because of the high costs. All this leads to more people buying and selling goods which is important for a country to prosper.

State colleges should be free because the economy will grow faster with more educated people, and young adults will not be paying college debt for half their life. How exactly this would be done is simple, put higher taxes on the wealthy. With the top class distributing their money towards education, everyone can have the opportunity to further their education. People can use their hard working money on other things, like purchasing a house or providing for a child. That is why it is important to have free college tuition because it creates an educated population, less debt, and saving for other necessities.

Finalist Essay:

Tori Jarvis (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

Since the recent crimes committed by the terror group ISIS, hate crimes against Muslims have skyrocketed. Recently, “an Arab-American man was brutally attacked by two white men...(who) also taunted his daughter, who wears a hijab, making references to ISIS... The attackers called (them) ‘r--head’ and said, ‘Go back to your country.’” Wrote Tom Carter for an article on the World Socialist Website. Obviously, these men attacked the man and his daughter for their race and religion, equating the fact that they were Muslim with terrorism even though there was no sensible reason to. People are so scared of terrorism that they lash out at anything they can associate with it.

People in power or who wish to be in power are using this fear to convince them that Muslims are the ones to be feared. The most recent -and most dangerous- example is Donald Trump, who wants to ban Muslims from coming into the country. This move has not only heightened the fear of ISIS, but made people believe the Muslims currently in our country are associated with terrorism, creating more violence. Encouraged by Presidential candidates like Donald Trump, some Americans blame the entire religion of Islam, and anyone who follows it, for all of our country’s problems. They believe that because these terrorists are following a distorted version of the Qu’ran and the religion of Islam, that anyone else who worships the peaceful religion is a terrorist as well. Unfortunately, people don’t realize that Muslims are not terrorists. Muslim athlete Muhammad Ali once said; “Terrorists are not following Islam. Killing people and blowing up people and dropping bombs in places and all this is not the way to spread the word of Islam. So people realize now that all Muslims are not terrorists.” Muslims are too often oppressed, even violently attacked by Americans who blame them for terrorism. Muslims in America today are now experiencing racism the way black people used to, and are violently and verbally abused by white people who are looking for someone to blame.

Jermaine Jackson, one of Michael Jackson’s siblings, has pointed out “Muslims have become the new Negroes in America. They are being mistreated at airports, by the Immigration - everywhere. Islam is a religion of peace. They are wrong.” People who wear hijabs seem to have a target placed on them. Muslims are “randomly selected” for full body searches at airports, forced to prove they’re in this country legally, and attacked by people who have different religious opinions. The violence against Muslims must end, whether it physical or mental. As the civil war in the Middle East is creating unlivable conditions for its inhabitants, they’re counting on us to take them in and keep them safe.

America is trying to divide and conquer - focusing on conquering Muslims as a whole rather than just ISIS. Rather than attacking the Muslims in our country, we should be focusing on the actual members of ISIS, and not people who have no association with the organization.

Finalist Essay:

Alexis Manchester (Green Mountain Technology and Career Center, *Junior*)

Today in America, people are going to prison wasting countless economic resources and potentially ruining the lives of people all because of the recreational use of marijuana.

While people often say marijuana is a gateway drug, I strongly disagree. There are more people that drink a glass a milk per day and become addicted to more serious drugs, than those who use marijuana. It is not uncommon to hear echoes of this sentiment in other contexts as well, particularly, the media and Presidential candidates. In fact, Senator Sanders himself suggests that marijuana should be legalized: "I suspect I would vote yes. And I would vote yes because I am seeing in this country too many lives being destroyed for non-violent offenses. We have a criminal justice system that lets CEOs on Wall Street walk away, and yet we are imprisoning or giving jail sentences to young people who are smoking marijuana. I think we have to think through this war on drugs which has done an enormous amount of damage." I strongly agree with this statement because there is not one reported death from an overdose of marijuana. In fact, 88,000 people have died from alcohol use. I personally have never heard of somebody murdering someone because they were under the influence of marijuana. Alcohol on the other hand, has been proven to impact our culture negatively.

Facts don't lie. 58% of Americans think marijuana should be legalized, including me. Around 40% of Americans admit to already using marijuana. If marijuana was legalized, we could tax it and allow citizens who choose to use it to benefit our communities in more effective ways than keeping it illegal. Marijuana is a safer drug than others and there is a very low risk of abuse. Marijuana can be safe and useful for instance. Legalizing marijuana will bring the nation's largest cash crop under the rule of law, creating jobs, and economic opportunities in the formal economy instead of the illicit market. Washington, Alaska, Oregon and Colorado haven't had any major issues with their legalization. Washington State raked in more than \$70 million in taxes its first year of legal regulated marijuana sales. In Colorado the total of marijuana tax and license cash funds is the total of \$11,290,012 annually. Alaska stands to make between \$5.1 million and \$19.2 million in tax revenue from commercial marijuana in 2016, according to the preliminary estimate by the Alaska Department of Revenue. Oregon's first week of recreational use of marijuana sales top \$11 million dollars. Clearly, the taxes incurred would positively benefit our state and country should we choose to jump on board.

In closing, I hope you can appreciate my ideas, although I am just one voice. America is a progressive kind of people and we must do what we can to continue to demonstrate the values that make us great. Thank you for your time.

Finalist Essay:

Sara Manfredi (Milton High School, *Senior*)

Before I begin this address, I would like to take a moment to thank all of you for being here today. But, there are issues our country must conquer in order to make our home safer, as well as more equal, for both ourselves, and the generations to come.

In recent years, it has come to attention of our government that there have been over 400,000 untested rape kits stuck in backlog all around the country. One precinct held over 5,000 in backlog, all untested, most cases left without any trial. How dare we do this to those hundreds upon thousands of victims? Who are we to deny them any sense of safety or justice? These facts have done nothing more than allow rapists to get out of any sort of punishment. This horrid trend must be stopped, and can only be stopped if this government takes immediate action. The issue with this is that many of these local jurisdictions do not have the money to process these kits, because of the innate lack of funding for said kits to be processed. I am willing to offer more funding through federal grants to these precincts, so these long backlogs can finally be tested, and the victims of these crimes can get the justice they deserve. To ensure this money is used to test these rape kits, I will work with Congress to pass a law into action that will give precincts a time constraint in which they must have these kits tested, most likely within 72 hours. By having this deadline set into place, as well as the money to fund said testing, this national backlog will gradually dwindle down. This justice is owed to the survivors of these vicious assaults.

Some victims, however, cannot be given the justice they deserve. A recent influx of mass shootings have killed 380 American citizens, and left hundreds of families in mourning over their lost loved ones. I am not going to say that any one of the perpetrators of the 294 mass shootings in the past year killed because they were lonely, lost outsiders. These killers were not in the right mind, no, but mental health is not to blame. What is to blame is American gun laws. These men were able to commit these heinous crimes because of how accessible guns are in this country. How do we stop this? We restrict and complicate. If we are to ensure the safety of the American public, we must ensure that only those who are specifically trained to use a gun, those who are able to handle one and not go awry are allowed to carry one. Police officers and military personnel should be the only ones to be able to carry handguns at all times for their jobs. Rifles shall be heavily restricted as well, only distributed to those who undergo a complicated vetting process, as to ensure that they will not become the next person to kill innocent bystanders. I just want the American public to be safe. I do not want any more men, women, and children to be victims of these preventable crimes. I only wish the best us. Thank you.

Finalist Essay:

William Martin (Mount Abraham Union High School, *Freshman*)

The United States is being cornered by problems, of all shapes and magnitude, from every direction. These issues need more attention and they will not be solved unless action is taken against them. Many of these situations will only get worse the longer we put them off. There are a variety of problems ranging from climate change to healthcare and we should be looking for a solution for all of them. The three issues that the U.S. should put most of its focus on, however, is the threat from ISIS, the price of higher education, and the cases of racism, especially those in police shootings.

The United States should spend more money to prevent ISIS from growing and causing more damage, because ISIS is a danger to the U.S., as well as other countries around the world and their citizens. Terrorism could also continue for a lot longer if we do not stop it soon. Terrorism really came onto the world stage after September 11, 2001. In a single day, a small group of people managed to kill thousands. Even before this, al-Qaeda truly started in the 1990s. This shows how long these groups have managed to continue, despite our efforts, which means we need to do more. Not only do we need to get rid of the organizations like ISIS that are here now, but we have to provide a stable system to make sure these types of groups don't return, or we could risk another disaster. ISIS will actually pay foreign fighters \$1,000 a month, which is how they get many of their recruits. Unfortunately, ISIS has a wide spread with connections in many places. This is a reason why it is hard to eradicate them, but also shows that we need to invest more into it if we want to get it done. The U.S. is however, already spending \$40 billion on fighting ISIS annually. This is a large sum of money, but of the \$1.1 trillion that the U.S. had for discretionary spending in 2015, it is only about 3.6 percent. The U.S. has a responsibility to help with the fight against ISIS, and the government should spend more money to disrupt this organization because they are a threat to everyone, everywhere, and will not go away unless we make them.

The U.S. should also spend more money on education, to make college more accessible to the average student, because it is important for getting good jobs and it costs far too much now. The average cost to go to a private college is \$32,405 which deters a lot of students who can't afford that price for four years. Since this price is so high, and those who can't afford it simply can't go, it leaves many without the education needed for higher paying jobs. This number is far too high. This even gives some doubt about getting their degrees, simply from the fear of debt. It is necessary to get a high paying job to be able to happily provide for a family, however the cost to get there is damaging, which is why the government has to step in. If the government did decide to make public college tuition free, it would cost \$62.6 billion. This cost may be high, but it's not even what is needed. There simply needs to be more spent on making it more affordable. Also, theoretically, if the government needed to raise taxes to make tuition affordable, and nearly everyone had gone to college and had a high paying job, then after a couple years they could raise taxes without too much effect. The U.S. needs to make college easier for everyone and make it more affordable, because it costs far too much and could help citizens live an easier life with more money.

The U.S. government needs to take more action against racial events because they defy the constitutional values of the United States and these problems only get worse when left unsolved. The U.S. abolished slavery in 1865 under President Lincoln, but since then there has always been a separation of people of color because of the false thought of white superiority. We can see this in the

way black people were treated in the 20th century, in how they were allowed little compared to those who were white. This shows a deep root of racism in this country, and though we have been making efforts to reduce it more and more, it still seems to not be enough. A large racism topic that has been in the media for a while is the shooting and other abuse white cops have committed on people of color. One example is Michael Brown, a black 18 year old, who was fatally shot in 2014 by a white officer. After there was no conviction of Darren Wilson, the shooter, many cried out in outrage. The commotion that was caused from that killing, and others, caused massive amounts of damage in protests to both people and property. There needs to be a better way to deal with these situations, otherwise the outrage will continue. There is also a question raised by statistics like that only 13.2% of the U.S. population is black, and yet they make up 39.4% of the prison population, or that nearly 50% of hate crimes are about racism. These numbers show how we need to increase the involvement of the government in these events- we cannot just ignore the danger behind these statistics. On the other hand, all U.S. citizens have the same legal rights, no matter their gender, race, or religion. This fact however, may not be fully true, because though on paper it may say there is no discrimination, that does not mean that there aren't people who do discriminate based on race. The government needs to step in on this issue, and use their power to end it, because it is dangerous to all and defies our American morals.

The U.S. will find itself in trouble if solutions are not quickly found to ISIS, the price of higher education, and acts of racism. If action is not taken against ISIS to permanently disrupt them, the danger they cause for everyone will only increase and get worse. Similarly, if money is not put towards helping offset the cost of higher education, we could see more and more people who can't afford to get a degree that could get them a job they can live off of, which would increase the separation of the upper and middle class. Lastly, it is very important that the U.S. finds a solution to the acts of racism that cause only harm and anarchy. The U.S. will never become the true country it was meant to be, and the "American Dream" will be fiction for many, until the problems we face today are solved.

Finalist Essay:

Hadley Menk (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Junior*)

All men are created equal. America was founded upon this fundamental belief, but today the meaning of these words has been lost.

Americans are not equal when some cannot afford healthcare, when a woman's power over her body is diminished, or when the pursuit of happiness is lost in the struggle to feed a family. Economically, there is more inequality in America than ever. According to the Pew Research Center, since 1983 "virtually all wealth gains made by U.S. families have gone to the upper-income group." The top 1% of American families received 22.5% of all pre-tax income in 2012, with the bottom 90% receiving less than 50% of total income for the first time ever.

For the plights of everyday Americans to rightfully regain the attention of the government, the deluge of money being pumped into the electoral system by big corporations and wealthy donors must be stopped. New campaign finance regulations and a reversal of the Citizens United decision will take the government out of the control of the wealthy elite and put it back into the hands of the people.

Policies designed to combat income inequality at its roots are the only way to fix our broken system. For example, we need a minimum wage that allows families an equal chance at happiness. We need political leadership that will give low-income women an equal chance at personal liberty, instead of seeking to strip funding from organizations like Planned Parenthood, which for many women are their only option for reproductive healthcare. We need a healthcare system that ensures that no one has less of a right to health because of their socioeconomic class. We need affordable education and job training programs to give young people the tools they need to contribute to our economy. Tax cuts for the wealthiest have only widened the gap and made life harder for too many Americans. It's time to unite, rather than divide, our country.

In order for the American people to unite, elected officials must lead the way, by following the will of the people, instead of the dictates of their wealthy donors. For example, in their 2014 National Climate Assessment, the White House found that low-income and minority communities suffer the most from climate change-induced events, including heat waves and floods. Still, many in Congress who benefit from oil companies continue to deny climate change exists. Congress must begin a full-scale attack on climate change including carbon emission taxes, incentives for renewable energy companies and consumers, and efforts to protect valuable natural resources.

"Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men." It's time for our government to reaffirm its commitment to the founding document which formed it 250 years ago, one which outlined a government whose purpose was to uphold its people's fundamental rights. When these rights are infringed upon by inequality, it is the duty of the government to address that inequality in order to preserve our American identity.

Finalist Essay:

Sophia Parker (Vergennes Union High School, *Junior*)

Nelson Mandela proclaimed: "It is in your hands to make of our world a better one for all."

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the complex and devastating crises we face today as a nation, to believe the solutions are out of our hands. I see two parallel sets of problems. On one hand, we have institutionalized problems which will require institutional solutions, financial resources, and political will. On the other hand, there is a personal malaise, discouragement, and alienation among citizens. The two problems are related because the alienation and discouragement stem in part from systems that have become corrupt and ineffective, serving the needs of the few at the expense of the many. However, there is also power in our simple personal choices and actions, which is often overlooked. Engaging this power does not require a political solution. A child can bring this forth. The most disenfranchised person can make a difference. This power resides in the simple personal choice to do good, to take action, to care, to make one small or large movement towards making life a little better for somebody.

Every one of us has strengths that we can bring to bear for the sake of another individual, our community, a specific cause, or the world at large. If each person devoted even an hour a week to making the world a better place, it would have a tremendous impact.

You are never too young or old to make a difference. You are never too poor, too weak, or too busy to make a difference. Every single one of us has strengths that we can harness to make the world better for the people around us. My 10 year-old neighbor drives his family's tractor to plow our driveway after every snowstorm, out of the kindness of his heart. My mom and I run wildlife camps for kids; one of our 9 year-old campers started an organization to help older shelter cats find homes. A sophomore at my high school helped organize a winter sleep-out to end homelessness, attended by over a hundred people. These are all young people seeing problems and finding ways to take action through compassion, courage, creativity, and community service.

I serve as Miss Vermont's Outstanding Teen; my platform is wildlife rehabilitation and stewardship of the natural world, which is a cause to which I have been devoted since I was a small child. I travel across Vermont encouraging young people to find their own passion and get involved in contributing something of value to their communities. The response is always inspiring.

The problems around us are daunting indeed. However, we cannot underestimate the power for good that resides in each individual. It can begin with something as simple as lending each other a hand, and can build into making our world a better one for all.

Finalist Essay:

Nick Sears (Vermont Commons School, *Senior*)

The United States of America is an amazing nation that continues to lead the world through the complex geopolitical problems that we are faced with today. As a strong economic and political world leader, we have become the role model for developing nations attempting to give their people the same freedoms and opportunities that Americans have become so accustomed to. This is why it is so important to work harder than we ever have before to better ourselves as a nation, because what we change will set a precedent of improvement around the world and inspire change.

The biggest problem in the U.S. is the incarceration system. It has been broken for decades, and there has been no legitimate attempt to fix it. Over the past thirty years, there has been a 500% increase in incarceration rates, resulting in the U.S. leading the world in number of prisoners with 2.2 million people currently incarcerated. Especially in this example, it is important to humanize these statistics. These are 2.2 million people, who now because of their conviction will find it much harder to be truly integrated back in their communities, due to the struggles of finding a job with a record, and the fact that they often do not qualify for social welfare. The incarceration system is also bankrupting both the state and federal government. It currently is the third highest state expenditure, behind health care and education.

Fortunately, we as a nation have the opportunity to fix the incarceration system. First, we need to get rid of mandatory minimum sentences. Judges from across the nation have said for decades that they do not like mandatory minimums, that they do not work, and that they are unconstitutional. Mandatory minimum sentences, coupled with racially biased laws concerning drug possession is the reason why we see the ratio of African American males to white males over 10:1. This leads to the second action we must take; we must end the war on drugs. It has proven to be a failed experiment that has reopened many racial wounds in our nation. The war on drugs also put addicts behind bars, rather than treating addiction like the problem it actually is; a mental health issue.

Finalist Essay:

Paige Thibault (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Freshman*)

In common day society, education is widely accepted as a valuable resource to our nation's future. Education has immeasurable impact on our lives and on our identity, as we build foundations of our growth off of our learning. However with all these potentially influential factors that education possesses, the system that we have nurtured has failed in reaching students with meaning and value. Like other things in our world, the system is broken.

What I've been noticing within my own education is that the prospect of content is idolized in the classroom. Teachers no longer cram memorization into our heads (an educational revolution in itself), yet their focus is still the intimate prevalence of deadlines and test scores. Yes – school is where we learn – yet the purpose of our learning should not to become 'smart'. When students start thinking that this is indeed the purpose of their learning, inspiration and drive are completely decimated. Being 'smart' is a subjective standard that we press upon our kids, yet it's something which has shallow value. Classes stuffed with disconnected information only promote this misconception even further. Why should we be focusing on feeding students material when the students themselves don't see why they're supposed to consume it?

And this isn't just the content; it's the atmosphere. An example: When an adult reads from a manual in front of a class, there are two parties in play. There's the instructor (includes the teacher, the manual, the authors of the manual), and there is the student body. Notice it's not twenty individual humans learning differently on the same topic, it is the singular and collective student group. Sitting in this blob of the "student body" and being considered solely for the fact that you belong to a mass of apparent learning is an extremely demoralizing thought in the learning setting. I want to be appreciated for what I can bring to my learning; not what the class average is. What value do I have if I can be replaced with a statistic?

I'll tell you why: our hopes and dreams are original. Our minds run differently. And most importantly our souls all want to go in our own direction. No matter how similar our test scores are, we will never be destined to have the same future, so why are we clustered to have the same upbringing? Why are we held to the same expectations if the only thing that is the same about us is the year on our birth certificate? I understand that grouping students by age is a positive thing, but we should not let that number classify us as learners.

We need to rethink education, emphasizing personal growth versus increased IQ. Students should not be accepted with their differences, but should be accepted because of them. The teachers that guild students should be trained with the ideology that learning is not for a destination, it is for a journey. Administrators and Curriculum Directors or Superintendents need to see the content and need to understand that force-feeding students knowledge is not knowledge at all. We need to create the environment where students have choice of what their learning environment looks like; choice of how they learn material; choice of how they develop and a choice of how they grow.

It's true: education is an important system that gets a significant share of financial and governmental attention. Now let's make it a revolution of consciousness. Let's make meaningful education for our future; not for our brains.

Finalist Essay:

Peter Unger (Champlain Valley Union High School, *Senior*)

The internet is the first human creation with the potential to unify and connect the world; with the potential to change the way we collaborate and innovate forever; with the potential to reestablish the United States of America as the preeminent global leader in education, technology, and medicine. However, none of this potential will be realized without a fundamental rethink of Internet Service Provider regulations. We also need a fresh approach on infrastructure capable of launching a new age industrial revolution. The United States of America needs a government maintained and mandated fiber optic network. We no longer have an economy based on production of tangible products for a regional economy, instead we produce innovative and revolutionary ideas. Without a fiber optic backbone, these ideas won't reach their potential. Let me convey to you the urgency and importance of this issue. The competition has already started or even finished the improvements this country is in dire need of. The cost of broadband in dollars per megabits per second ranked Bulgaria as number one with a cost of forty seven cents per megabit per second, and in thirty third place is the United States of America at three dollars and fifty cents. This disconnect between value and product is dousing the innovative fire that is the American Technology industry.

What do we do? Myself and experts alike, know for certain that the Internet Service Providers aren't going to figure it out on their own. They are up selling us into decade old technology for a premium. Currently, there is no incumbent to challenge the oligopoly that are the American Internet Service Providers. The only realistic solution to this dire problem is a mindset change in the legislative branch of this very country; people don't do things on the internet, people just do things. Internet needs to be classified as the true utility it is. The internet may be the most powerful collaboration and creation tool ever known to man. I personally believe that we can't currently comprehend the possibilities that will be made real by this truly amazing tool.

Do you want cable companies to control what website you visit and to prioritize services that pay a premium? Currently, these are controlled by a concept known as net neutrality, the cable companies' lobbyists want to abolish this fundamental protection of freedom of speech and innovation. Without this fundamental freedom, the creativity, innovation, and communication, at which the internet is so powerful at stimulating, will be stomped out for good.

The only way to protect the openness, fairness, and freedom we as United States Citizens are accustomed to as well as enhance the creativity, innovation and communication, which we all use the internet for, is for the Federal Communications Commission to reclassify broadband service under Title II of the Telecommunications act. This letter is not a preventative measure, this letter is an eleventh hour plea to pull even with the rapidly evolving global information arms race.