

# WASTE REPORT



**SPRING 2019: WASTE IN FULL BLOOM**

BY CHAIRMAN RAND PAUL



Springtime has come again! The flowers are blooming, the leaves are slowly but surely returning to the trees, and the birds are chirping. Hope springs eternal amid all the new beginnings – but so does government waste, as it appears bureaucrats are just as intent on wasting your money as ever.

Like clockwork, it is that time of year again when Congress considers the federal budget. And with budget season here, it is incumbent upon us all to remember that the United States is more than \$22 trillion in debt. Despite record revenues thanks to tax reform, the federal government still managed to increase the debt by \$1.2 trillion in Fiscal Year 2018 due to drastic increases in spending. But rather than address the problem, Congress plans to shirk its responsibility to tackle our fiscal crisis yet again by considering a budget that doesn't even attempt to balance. Meanwhile, the Congressional Budget Office and the Office of Management and Budget agree that spending on interest on the debt will exceed defense spending in five years and cost nearly \$1 trillion in just 10 short years.

So here we are, standing athwart those who would waste Americans' money, showing the American people and Congress a small fraction – just \$42.6 million – of the wasteful projects on which agencies have spent their tax dollars.

And we also remind Congress that when agencies have enough money to waste, they have too much money in the first place.

## The federal government wasted Americans' tax dollars as it...

- Bought an elementary school gym scoreboard at a 491% markup (BIA) ..... \$13,000
- Sent international students to college for free (State) ..... \$15,825,000
- Studied the habits of online dating app users (NIH and NSF) ..... \$1,200,000
- Taught Lao to Laotians (USAID) ..... \$20,000,000
- Improved the quality of TV in Moldova (State) ..... \$2,000,000
- Paid to teach social scientists how to apply for grants (NSF) ..... \$103,777
- Allowed the 1033 Program to be abused (DOD) ..... \$2,711,255
- “Tested” whether social justice improves STEM education (NSF) ..... \$649,773
- Funded a week of summer school for grad students (NSF) ..... \$49,990
- Developed 6 undergrad course units on food marketing (NIFA) ..... \$128,054

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**TAXPAYER DOLLARS WASTED: \$42,680,849**

## DUNKING ON THE TAXPAYER

***The Bureau of Indian Affairs paid a 491% markup on a scoreboard for an elementary school gym***

Regular readers of *The Waste Report* know it typically highlights the many frivolous ways the federal government spends your money. This story is a little different — it shows the wasteful results of needless and costly federal rules that dictate what companies the government is allowed to do business with. In this case, **the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) spent \$13,000, which amounted to a 491 percent markup from what retailers were charging for similar items on the open market, on a gym scoreboard for an elementary school on an Indian reservation.**<sup>1</sup>

### Everyone’s Favorite Topic: Regulations!

Why did Uncle Sam pay nearly five times the going rate, you ask? Because it complied with the Buy Indian Act, a law regulating how BIA acquires goods and services for reservations. Department of Interior (DOI) regulations require the BIA “to give preference to Indians whenever the use of that authority is authorized and practicable.”<sup>2</sup>

Though the Buy Indian Act does permit purchasers to buy from non-Indian vendors under certain circumstances, the process is so laborious and time-consuming that it is, for all intents and purposes, prohibitive. **“Any deviation from [the Buy Indian Act] policy,” according to the BIA, “must be approved by an authorized official and documented in the contract file, except for**

**purchase card transactions”**<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis theirs).

This includes, according to DOI, a requirement that “[t]he purchaser must conduct market research which shows that he or she cannot reasonably expect to obtain offers from IEEs [Indian Economic Enterprises] that will be competitive in terms of price, quality, and delivery.”<sup>4</sup> (Even in cases where a purchase card can be used, the choice still needs to be justified.<sup>5</sup>)

The various steps in the deviation process, including cases where a price is obtained from an IEE but found to be “unreasonable,” are laid out in Part 1480 of the DOI Acquisition Regulation.<sup>6</sup>

These steps require navigating the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), a **1,900-page, 53-part, 312-section tome outlining the federal government’s procedures for everything from purchasing helium to processing donations of food.**<sup>7</sup> It is unwieldy, complex, and unnecessarily burdensome.

Needless to say, it is highly unlikely someone would take the time to jump through all these hoops, especially if an item is needed quickly.

Of course, there is something to be said for buying from IEEs to serve Indian reservations when the prices are comparable to those on the open market. But with current regulations, IEE suppliers are not incentivized to compete with non-IEEs for the government’s business, so higher prices can be more easily charged, which in turn limits the non-governmental patrons willing to buy from IEEs.

Economic engineering through federal mandates, though well-intentioned, can generate unintended consequences including hampering job growth, failing to address underlying concerns, and costing the government even more money than it would otherwise spend. It's past time to remove needless procurement regulations that harm taxpayers and private businesses alike.

## **FREE COLLEGE FOR FOREIGNERS (PT. 2)**

***The State Department is spending \$15,825,000.00 on free college for international students***

For millions of Americans, community colleges offer an affordable option for receiving a college education and gaining a competitive edge in the job market. But despite American families scrimping and saving to afford college, **the State Department is using your taxes to pay the tuition of international students enrolled in American community colleges.**

Avid readers of *The Waste Report* may recall a 2015 entry in which we exposed the profligate spending of the Community College Initiative (CCI),<sup>8</sup> an exchange program that, according to the State Department, “provides scholarships [to students from other countries] to spend up to one academic year at U.S[.] community colleges.”<sup>9</sup> Since this program is so out of step with the Trump administration’s agenda, one might have expected it to have been ended by now.

But one would have been wrong, because **the State Department’s Bureau of**

**Educational and Cultural Affairs is still spending millions on the program — committing up to \$15,825,000, to be exact, to send a total of about 390 foreign students to American community colleges across academic years 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22.**<sup>10</sup> The initiative will cover the costs of “approximately 130 program participants from approximately 12 countries, to include Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa and other countries (subject to change),” according to the funding announcement, each academic year.<sup>11</sup>

While the State Department hasn’t nailed down the countries of origin yet (and leaves itself room to make other adjustments along the way<sup>12</sup>), they have so far determined that the lucky students will get to enroll in one of the following areas: agriculture, applied engineering, business management and administration, early childhood education, information technology, media, public safety, or tourism and hospitality management.<sup>13</sup> For some reason, this list excludes several disciplines that would be valuable in many



**CCI students at the Alexandria, VA, campus of the Northern Virginia Community College. Photo Credit: <https://blogs.nvcc.edu/ci/2017/09/21/introducing-the-2017-2018-cci-program-participants/>.**

other parts of the world, such as nursing and vocational skills.

At the end of the program, the participants are supposed to earn a certificate or similar credential “whenever possible.”<sup>14</sup> **But when not possible, it’s unclear what (if anything) they will earn, since the CCI Program lasts no more than half the time it takes to complete an associate degree.**

**And in case you were wondering, the \$15,825,000 spent on this initiative would be enough to cover a full year of in-state tuition for more than 3,200 U.S. community college students.**<sup>15</sup>

## **SWIPE LEFT ON WASTE**

***The NIH and NSF are spending up to \$1,200,000.00 to study online dating user habits***

The Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “was founded in 1962 to investigate human development throughout the entire life process, with a focus on understanding disabilities and important events that occur during pregnancy,” according to their website, which also states that their “mission is to ensure that every person is born healthy and wanted, that women suffer no harmful effects from reproductive processes, and that all children have the chance to achieve their full potential for healthy and productive lives.”<sup>16</sup> The National Science Foundation (NSF) was created “to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and

welfare; to secure the national defense...”<sup>17</sup> **Apparently, NICHD and NSF think a good way to advance these missions is by studying dating app user habits, funded by cobbling together several grants totaling \$1.2 million.**<sup>18</sup>

Some of the findings have made more headlines than others, though what they all have in common is that they have nothing to do with either the NIH’s or NSF’s purpose. Most notable was a finding published in *The New York Times* that “sexual desirability peaks at age 50” for men and at age 18 for women.<sup>19</sup> But the *Times* did not highlight the other findings this research unearthed, which included **finding that online dating app users pursue potential mates “who are on average about 25% more desirable than themselves,” as well as finding “that the probability of receiving a response” on an app “markedly” decreases when the pursued is more desirable than the pursuer, and that dating app users exert greater effort to pursue “more desirable” mates than they do to pursue less desirable ones.**<sup>20</sup> Another groundbreaking finding funded by these tax dollars was that the users “enact screeners (“deal breakers”) that encode acceptability cutoffs,” such as physical distance from the user.<sup>21</sup>

There is no reason research like this should receive federal funding. In truth, the only suitable financiers would be dating app companies themselves. It is silly to pretend this study has anything to do with reproductive and childhood development, “public health” or “science promotion” more generally.

NIH and NSF grant review panels would do the taxpayers a favor by following a strategy of dating app users: only swipe left on the most attractive proposals.

## THE LANGUAGE OF WASTE

***USAID is spending  
\$20,000,000.00 to teach Lao to  
Laotians***

If we told you the U.S. government was spending money to address illiteracy in the United States, you might not object. But what if we were to tell you the U.S. is spending \$20 million teaching Laotians their own language?

**Well, that's exactly what USAID is doing, committing 20 million American taxpayer dollars to the Lao People's Democratic Republic, a communist nation controlled by one party, in pursuit of (according to USAID):**

- 1.) **"Improved Lao reading ability for non-Lao speakers and vulnerable students,"**
- 2.) **"Improved classroom instruction through enhanced teacher competencies and resources to meet needs of target children," and**
- 3.) **"Strengthened community engagement to provide a conducive learning environment for improved reading skills, particularly for non-Lao speaking and vulnerable communities."<sup>22</sup>**

The USAID outpost in Bangkok, Thailand, has opted to focus the agency's efforts on, as it says, "children in the pre-primary education (pre-primary classrooms

attached to primary schools), and in early grade classrooms through grade 2 with monitoring of children in grade 3 to see if interventions are successful."<sup>23</sup> USAID says, "[w]ith limited funding" (though since when is a \$20 million award "limited funding?"), it will concentrate "on a selected number of communities."<sup>24</sup>

USAID also points out that a portion of Laotians are not native Lao speakers and do find it difficult to "learn the national curriculum provided in the textbooks and learning materials."<sup>25</sup>

Granted, these are serious concerns. But, for some reason, the U.S. government has deemed it appropriate to spend your tax dollars on tackling another country's issues with education even though, despite all the government funds poured in at home, reading proficiency here shows a lot of room for improvement. **"More than 36 million adults in the United States cannot read, write, or do basic math above a third grade level,"** literacy advocates note.<sup>26</sup> In New Jersey alone, which has only a slightly larger population than Laos,<sup>27, 28</sup> a report showed that **"17% of adults lack basic literacy skills."<sup>29</sup>**

In 2015, the Organisation [sic] for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found **the mean U.S. reading score was second tier, "not significantly different from the OECD average," and a point lower than the three-year trend.<sup>30</sup>** The U.S. ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> in literacy globally, tied with Taiwan, and trails far behind the top five: Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, Finland, and Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, even after millions upon millions of dollars, the government can't seem to teach English to American kids, but thinks it can use millions more of your money to teach Lao to Laotian kids.

## WASTE: AS SEEN ON TV

**The State Department is spending \$2,000,000.00 to improve TV programming in Moldova**

There is widespread international agreement that the Moldovan television industry is not internationally competitive. But apparently the State Department has determined it is worth saving, because it is devoting \$2 million of taxpayers' money to the effort. Why the State Department would use American tax dollars to support direct competition with an American industry is beyond us. Nevertheless, **it is spending \$2 million to “increase the quality and quantity of locally produced content on Moldovan television through co-productions that expand investment and employment in the media space,”** according to a State Department funding notice.<sup>32</sup>

### Countering Russian TV Influence

In theory, the grant is designed in part to counterbalance Russian-produced television content shown in Moldova. According to the State Department, “entertainment content rebroadcast and/or repackaged from the Russian Federation continues to maintain a dominant local position, given its low costs and high quality, when contrasted against primarily low-quality domestic production of

entertainment programs. ...”<sup>33</sup> Citing a 2017 report from the Independent Press Association (IPA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported in February 2018 that the “Russian media ‘broadcast propaganda messages and constantly manipulate public opinion’ both in its informational and entertainment programming.”<sup>34</sup>

Their article was written in context of a then-recent development in Moldova. On January 10, 2018, more than five months before the deadline for this grant application,<sup>35</sup> Andrian Candu, acting president of Moldova at the time, approved a law “ban[ning] most television and radio programs not produced in the European Union, the US, or Canada, or by the states that have not ratified the European Convention on Transborder Television,”<sup>36</sup> according to a news report. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has also reported the move “effectively bans the rebroadcasting in Moldova of Russian television programs on news, analysis, politics, and military issues.”<sup>37</sup> So the Moldovan government is already moving to counteract



**Animal welfare activist appearing on Moldova's state-owned network, Moldova 1. Photo Credit:**  
<https://megliovivere.com/2018/07/31/appearing-on-moldovan-tv/>.

certain Russian influence — without any need for help from the U.S. State Department.

### **A Priority for American Taxpayers?**

With our national debt now exceeding \$22 trillion, and many domestic needs to consider, it simply makes no sense to spend American tax dollars on this project, especially since the State Department isn't just planning to support Moldovan programming; it's seeking to build the Moldovan domestic TV industry from the ground up.

The U.S. Embassy in Moldova acknowledges that the Moldovan TV sector isn't viable on its own, with the Embassy noting the goal of the \$2 million grant as being “to create an environment in the creative television content industry which will allow Moldova's creative content industry to mature to a level where it can be sustainable. Ideally,” it continues, “Moldovan production companies would have the capacity to conceive, produce, and distribute high-quality programming and formats within Moldova and abroad.”<sup>38</sup>

Ultimately, this fool's errand certainly has the makings of a great TV show — one that could be a comedy or a tragedy. We'll have to stay tuned to find out.

## **GRANTS FOR GRANTS**

***The National Science Foundation spent \$103,777.00 to teach social scientists how to apply for grants***

In fiscal year 2017, the National Science Foundation awarded \$6.2 billion in funding for various proposals.<sup>39</sup> As part of its review process, the NSF rates proposals on a scale

from zero to five.<sup>40</sup> But the NSF must think the quality of the proposals can be improved, because that year it issued a **\$103,777 grant to the University of Mississippi to teach “early-career PhDs” how to apply for grants.**<sup>41</sup>

Working college professors, for whom the classes are designed,<sup>42</sup> must be knocking down doors, asking to be taught how to write grant proposals, right? That's why NSF approved this expenditure? Wrong. **The NSF is clear the “Summer Course on Grant Writing in the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SCG)” is being provided to “early-career scientists who ... will be recruited to participate.”**<sup>43</sup>

The NSF award abstract states the course's focus as being on “the social, behavioral, and economic (SBE) sciences with mentorship and training in grant writing.”<sup>44</sup> Aims include giving participants “a brief appreciation of research design ...,” along with “help[ing] [them] locate NSF and other federal research support” agencies, “improv[ing] [their] ability to develop and write a scientifically well-conceived research proposal,” and “promot[ing] the spread of appropriate, robust scientific research in the SBE sciences in underrepresented communities...,” according to the abstract.<sup>45</sup>

Just in this edition, *The Waste Report* has once again documented instances of government waste through NSF grants. As we say elsewhere, this is simply out of our desire to see the NSF better use the money Americans work hard to earn.

We're not so sure it inspires greater confidence for taxpayers to hear the NSF, with such a track record, is using more of

their money to fund training in how to ... get even more of their money from the NSF.

One can only hope that at some point during the program, these social scientists will learn how to be frugal with the taxpayers' money.

## **"PROTECT AND SERVE"**

***The Pentagon sent \$2,711,255 in surplus military gear to police in Thetford Township, Michigan (pop. <7,000)***

Put yourself in the shoes of a police officer for a moment. What would you need to do your job? Perhaps a pistol, a bullet-proof vest, or a squad car? The chief of police of Thetford Township, Michigan, seems to have had a more expansive wish list. **Ultimately, a department that serves a population of fewer than 7,000 people<sup>46</sup> received \$2,711,255 worth of surplus military equipment from the Department of Defense (DOD), according to the Genesee County sheriff.<sup>47</sup> And that stunning figure is only part of the story.**

So how did such a small town manage to amass a small fortune in materiel from DOD?

### **The 1033 Program**

Those seeking answers need only look to the DOD's 1033 program. **The program allows registered law enforcement agencies to receive surplus military supplies "for bona fide law enforcement purposes that assist in their arrest and apprehension mission,"** according to the DOD's Defense Logistics Agency (DLA).<sup>48</sup> The DLA reports that "[o]ver 8,000 federal

and state law enforcement agencies from all 50 states and the U.S. territories participate in the program."<sup>49</sup> It also notes these agencies must place specific requests, justify them, and get approval from the State Coordinator and Law Enforcement Support Office.<sup>50</sup>

Somehow, despite the requirement that 1033 requisitions serve "bona fide law enforcement purposes," **Thetford Township PD managed to accrue nearly 4,000 items from the program,<sup>51</sup> including:**

- **Four mine detector sets<sup>52</sup>**
- **Three hydroseeders<sup>53</sup>**
- **Two parachutes<sup>54</sup>**
- **A bounce house<sup>55</sup>**
- **A rock-climbing wall<sup>56</sup>**
- **A 7-ton forktruck<sup>57</sup>**
- **Humvees<sup>58</sup>**
- **Snowshoes<sup>59</sup>**
- **Dive boots<sup>60</sup>**
- **1,000 kitchen items<sup>61</sup>**
- **A tractor<sup>62</sup>**
- **A riding lawnmower<sup>63</sup>**

The Pentagon must be facing some unusual challenges if it needs hydroseeders, "kitchen items," a riding lawnmower, and a bounce house to defeat our nation's adversaries. And who knew that these were vital tools of domestic law enforcement, too?! **The criminal element in Thetford Township must be armed to the teeth if the police there need *mine detectors* to keep the streets safe!**

The truth of the matter is that Thetford Township criminals are no more advanced than criminals anywhere else. The DOD simply has far too much materiel on its hands thanks to obscene levels of military spending. **The federal government spends more in**

inflation-adjusted dollars on military spending today than it did during our arms race with the Soviet Union.<sup>64</sup> Is the U.S. in more danger today than it was in the days of air raid drills in elementary schools? Not hardly. But DOD bureaucrats would rather militarize local police forces with their excess gear than admit they don't need all the tax money flowing their way.

### **Small Town, Big Attention**

It would be one thing if the Thetford Township PD was using all of the equipment it acquired. **But a township audit revealed that “[t]he police didn’t keep track of what they had or what they had given away,”** *The Detroit News* reported.<sup>65</sup> The article also noted that “nearly a third of the items ... were listed as ‘off-site’” in an inventory log created by the police chief “without giving a specific location.”<sup>66</sup>

Attention to the situation only continued to grow. **In August 2018, news broke that the Genesee County sheriff had arrested the police chief, who was “charged with embezzlement and obstruction of justice” stemming from his alleged handling of**



As the controversy intensified, local news reported on Thetford Township Supervisor Gary Stevens finding “a seven-ton piece of military surplus equipment” someone left in his driveway. Credit: ABC12 News Team: <https://www.abc12.com/content/news/Thetford-Township-on-hook-for-towing-military-surplus-equipment-police-vote-nixed-489267641.html>.

certain items from the 1033 program.<sup>67</sup> The following month, a report stated, “Thetford Township will have to return its federal military surplus – if it can locate it – to the government, if there are no other police departments that want it.”<sup>68</sup> As of this writing, the police chief’s case continues working its way through the legal system.

Earlier this year, the Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management Subcommittee wrote to the DOD to ask how certain items Thetford Township PD acquired through the 1033 program were deemed to meet the “bona fide law enforcement purposes” requirement, and what safeguards are in place to prevent future misuse of the program. We will continue to monitor the situation as we stay vigilant in the battle to protect taxpayer resources.

## **CHEMICAL REACTIONS, ANATOMICAL DISSECTIONS, AND #ACTIVISM**

***The National Science Foundation spent \$649,773.00 to see if STEM majors benefit from a college program based on social justice***

What were you asked in your last job interview? Were you asked about your interest in the position and your qualifications for it? Probably. Were you asked about your commitment to social justice? Probably not.

So why did the National Science Foundation (NSF) spend \$649,773 to find out whether an undergraduate program based on social justice ideas helps students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) complete

their degrees or enter STEM professions?<sup>69</sup>

### What's Actually Being Studied?

The taxpayer funds were invested in an effort to “investigate how impactful a social justice curriculum is on students’ STEM career/higher education choices”<sup>70</sup> that would “also examine the way in which a mentoring program with specifically defined activities contributes to student success.”<sup>71</sup>

Cabrini University, a liberal arts institution in Pennsylvania, is implementing an “ambitious plan ... based on the hypothesis that engaging the ... scholars in STEM learning and career exposure through a framework of social justice will help to secure their retention to graduation and placement in graduate or professional positions in STEM fields.”<sup>72</sup>

But manifestly, through NSF, taxpayers financed 16 need-based scholarships of “up to \$8,000/year for four years (\$32,000 [total per student])”<sup>73</sup> to Cabrini University for “low income biology and chemistry majors”<sup>74</sup> (one cohort in fall 2017 and another in fall 2018<sup>75</sup>).

The abstract lists “[a]cademic and social support activities for the scholars” as “includ[ing] (a) cohort-based learning communities, (b) peer and faculty mentoring, and (c) early and consistent research experiences via course-based research and other more traditional student faculty collaborations.”<sup>76</sup> It also notes “[t]he project is anchored in Cabrini College’s [now University] Justice Matters core curriculum,

which ... [integrates] civic and social responsibility into student learning.”<sup>77</sup>

What exactly is the *Justice Matters* curriculum, you ask?

### Cabrini University and *Justice Matters*

Whereas some colleges have core academic requirements based on subject areas, Cabrini has *Justice Matters*, a curriculum it describes as “develop[ing] a common core of knowledge and connect[ing] the theory and practice of social justice to each student’s major.”<sup>78</sup> So Cabrini University has issued NSF funds to 16 incoming STEM students, who would already have to go through the *Justice Matters* core curriculum in order to graduate,<sup>79</sup> and enrolled them in a “specialized”<sup>80</sup> program (“Science Scholars for Social Justice”<sup>81</sup>). It will then track how many of them go on to complete a degree and how many enter professions in their fields of study<sup>82</sup> — which is something most college alumni offices do anyway.

The funds this project spends on 16 students at one liberal arts college exceed the combined federal income tax burden of 77 middle-income Americans.<sup>83</sup> The NSF owes American taxpayers an explanation as to why it thought this was a good use of those hard-earned tax dollars.

## ENGINEERING WASTE

***The National Science Foundation spent \$49,990.00 on one week of summer school for grad students***

NSF grants are, unfortunately, a frequent topic of *The Waste Report*. This is out of no ill will toward the NSF, but out of a wish to see it stop frittering away the American taxpayers' money on frivolous projects that don't advance our national interests.

Unfortunately, the NSF has not heeded our call, instead giving the University of Southern California (USC) \$49,990 to put on a six-day<sup>84</sup> “intensive and interactive educational experience [for] graduate students who are interested in studying decision making in the context of engineering design and systems engineering ... from graduate programs that do not have appropriate coursework in this area.”<sup>85</sup> The abstract outlined a program including “social events ... [to] enable students to develop their networking skills” and said that “[t]ravel and participation scholarships [would] serve to ensure a broad participation that maximizes community impact.”<sup>86</sup>

At the time the award was granted, researchers claimed that “the summer school will have a broad impact in the research community, including other NSF-supported research projects, by advancing training and standards in this area of research.”<sup>87</sup> If the NSF was persuaded that paying for 20 students<sup>88</sup> to attend a six-day conference would have a “broad impact,” one can only guess what they

would think a program of narrow impact looks like.

One can certainly understand the benefits USC is reaping from NSF support, but what about the American taxpayer? In the past, NSF funds totaling over \$331,608,950 have been used on absurd projects, *The Waste Report* has found, including studies about the betting habits of entrepreneurs in Uganda,<sup>89</sup> winemaking programs at community colleges,<sup>90</sup> how to make tomatoes taste better,<sup>91</sup> and many more. Meanwhile, the United States is \$22 trillion in debt.

It appears *The Waste Report* will have to offer our intensive and interactive educational experience about decision-making to the NSF employees who approved this grant. Lesson One: Decide to reject wasteful grants like this one.

## DESERTING FACTS FOR NARRATIVES

***The National Institute of Food and Agriculture spent \$128,054.00 on six undergraduate food marketing course modules***

There is an oft-repeated, yet misleading, claim that “[m]ore than twenty-three million Americans live in ‘food deserts,’ low-income communities with only limited access to healthy and nutritious foods.”<sup>92</sup>

Former First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move!” campaign popularized this idea, saying that “[i]f we don’t solve [the] problem [of childhood obesity], one third of all children born in 2000 or later will suffer from diabetes at some point in their lives. Many

others will face chronic obesity-related health problems like heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and asthma.”<sup>93</sup> As part of this push to combat childhood obesity, the “Let’s Move!” campaign took aim at food deserts.<sup>94</sup>

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), jumped on the bandwagon, issuing a \$128,054 grant to Saint Joseph’s University (SJU) to, according to the grant, “transform food marketing education by creating a series of six ... undergraduate course modules designed to integrate social justice education and research training to identify and address the unmet food needs of urban residents living in food deserts.”<sup>95</sup>

### Too Convenient to be True

But even during the early Obama years, not everyone was convinced about the underlying assumption. A piece in 2010 argued that “our [society’s] take on the obesity issue at hand cannot be that sugary and high-fat food is always the only food that is available to poor people within walking distance. It simply isn’t true.”<sup>96</sup> Even if we “make sure all poor people live three blocks or fewer from a supermarket,” the writer contended, “we will see a problem continue.”<sup>97</sup>

Few publications were more sympathetic to the Obama administration than the left-leaning online magazine *Slate*, yet even it published a piece in 2014 saying that “before Obama’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative was announced in 2010, studies

suggested that the food desert explanation for obesity wasn’t right.”<sup>98</sup>

Yet government rushed in, because it can just use someone else’s money – yours.

As the *Slate* article noted, “It’s easy to understand why Michelle Obama and other influential figures have promoted fresh food initiatives: Bringing a bounty of fresh produce to impoverished ‘food deserts’ is a lovely idea. But the idea isn’t borne out by evidence.”<sup>99</sup>

The point has continued to find even more backing since then. As one example, in 2015, a National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) report would conclude that “healthfulness of household consumption responds minimally to improvements in local retail environments.”<sup>100</sup>



Though they make for a convenient narrative, common assumptions about food deserts are unsupported by the facts. Photo Credit: elvissa,

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/elvissa/822691369/sizes/m/>

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In other words, “social justice education and research training” does not account for taste buds, and even if you make healthy food available to shoppers, you can’t decide

somebody else's personal preferences for them.

SJU justified the grant, which works out to **a cost of \$21,342.33 per academic unit**, by asserting that a “lack of appropriate academic preparation is resulting in a growing shortage of qualified supermarket managers”<sup>101</sup> to deal with what they thought was the issue and stating that the “project's intended beneficiaries are undergraduate food marketing students who represent tomorrow's food industry leaders.”<sup>102</sup>

But if students rely on false premises about the food industry, they will find themselves woefully unqualified to join it, much less to lead it.

<sup>1</sup> FSO Correspondence with Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. September, 2017.

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