DEBATING FOR DEMOCRACY 2013 LEGISLATIVE HEARING
REQUEST FOR LETTERS TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

OVERVIEW: Debating for Democracy (D4D)™ is a distinctive campus-based co-curricular program that represents the mission of Project Pericles (www.projectpericles.org) in action. On each campus, Periclean students research, develop, and advocate their opinions and positions on current public policy issues. The primary goal of D4D is to inspire and encourage all participants to become successful and resourceful advocates in their community.

On March 21 and 22, 2013, student leaders from each of the participating Periclean colleges and universities are invited to attend the 2013 D4D National Conference at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts in New York City. The conference will consist of workshops, keynote addresses, and panel discussions that will introduce the students to leading figures in civic engagement, education, environment, politics, public policy, and social entrepreneurship. One of the activities at the national conference will be a legislative hearing. The legislative hearing will allow students the opportunity to discuss their policy ideas with a panel of current and former elected officials and other public policy experts.

To participate in the legislative hearing and to encourage students to write their elected officials, Project Pericles is requesting an original letter to an elected official from groups (two or more students) at Periclean colleges and universities. Five of these letters from five different colleges will be selected by a panel of judges to be presented at the legislative hearing. The two lead authors of the five finalist letters will travel to New York to present and defend their letter and its subject at the legislative hearing.

ELIGIBILITY: In order to be eligible to participate in the legislative hearing and attend the D4D National Conference, a student must a) be a full-time undergraduate at one of the Periclean campuses; b) be a freshman, sophomore, or junior as defined by their college or university; and c) write and mail a letter to an elected official. Students selected to participate in the legislative hearing must be a freshman, sophomore, or junior during the Spring 2013 semester and be returning to their campus for the 2013-14 year.

SELECTION PROCESS: Students must submit their letter to their Project Pericles Program Director by Wednesday, January 30, 2013. The Program Director will review each letter and select the four strongest letters to forward to Project Pericles. Each college must email their package (Word or PDF) of up to four letters to Jan Liss jan.liss@projectpericles.org by 5 pm EST on Monday, February 4. The names of all of the students who worked on each letter must be sent to Project Pericles with the two students who played the leading roles in preparing each letter clearly identified. These students must be able to attend the conference in New York City on March 21 and 22. All letters should be mailed by the students to the appropriate elected official by February 4.

A committee consisting of people with significant experience in public policy will review the submitted letters using the criteria below. Based on this review, Project Pericles staff will select the five finalist teams. By February 15, the announcement of the five finalist teams will be shared with the Periclean campuses. Project Pericles will contact the two students from the five finalist teams to arrange for them to attend the National Conference on March 21 and 22.

JUDGING CRITERIA: The evaluation of each letter will rest on the students’ success at conducting high quality policy analysis and research; clarity of presentation; and adherence to the rules detailed in the Letter to an Elected Official Guidelines (pages 3-4). The five letters that do the best job of meeting the following criteria will be selected to be presented at the legislative hearing:

1) Policy Analysis and Research: The most important aspect of the letter is the quality of the analysis and research, which determines 80% of the evaluation. The evaluation will rest on each team’s success at identifying a federal or state policy problem in their letter, proposing a solution to the problem they identified, and conducting and interpreting research to bolster their letter.

- Does the letter identify one public policy problem to be addressed and explain how this problem impacts the students?
- Does the letter recommend one legislative solution? Is the legislative solution feasible economically and politically?
- Does the letter contain logical judgment and analysis?
- Does the letter focus on a federal or state public policy issue that impacts the students and their community?
- Does the proposal demonstrate the use of primary and/or secondary resources to bolster their argument?
- Does the letter demonstrate an understanding of the historical context of the problem and solution being discussed?

2) Clarity of Presentation: Although the ability of the students to prepare a letter that meets all of the criteria discussed in the previous section is important, the clarity of the letter will also be considered. This section is worth 20% of the total evaluation.

- Is the written material clear and grammatically correct?
- Is the letter effective in communicating the significance of the problem and the solution?

AWARD:

- The ten lead authors from the five finalist teams most responsible for writing each of the five letters will attend the 2013 D4D National Conference at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts in New York. Project Pericles will pay for the transportation, hotel, and meals for the ten students.

- Project Pericles will provide a $3,000 award to the students at the college that submits the best letter to an elected official as determined by the panel of judges during the legislative hearing. In consultation with Project Pericles, the students can use this money to fund advocacy and education activities including lobbying trips and workshops. Teams that have won this award in the past have travelled to Washington, D.C. to meet with Members of Congress and their staffs to discuss the issues raised in their letters. The four semi-finalist teams will each receive a $500 award to fund advocacy and education activities including lobbying trips and workshops.

- Project Pericles staff will work with the winning team and the semi-finalist teams to develop their advocacy and education activities.

IMPORTANT DATES:

**January 30, 2013** — All letters to an elected official are due to the Project Pericles Program Director. Program Directors may set an earlier deadline. Students should consult with their Program Director to confirm this deadline.

**February 4, 2013** — Each college or university must submit up to four letters to an elected official to Project Pericles by 5:00 pm EST. A copy of the letter must also be mailed to the appropriate U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, State Senator or State Representative.

**February 15, 2013** — By this date, a panel of experts will review the letters and five teams (of two students) will be selected for the legislative hearing. All Periclean campuses will be notified.

LETTER TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL GUIDELINES

“Letters are an extremely effective way of communicating with your elected officials. Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write.”

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Many federal and state policy issues are suitable for this letter. Possible issues include:

- Campaign Finance
- Climate Change
- Federal Budget Deficit
- Funding for Higher Education (Grants and Loans)
- Gun Control
- Immigration
- K-12 Education
- Pension Reform
- U.S. Involvement in Middle East

In the letter, students must identify one national or state public policy problem to be addressed and analyze how this problem impacts them personally, people in their community, people in their state, and, if a federal issue, people across the United States. In the letter, students must recommend at least one legislative solution. The students may recommend an original legislative solution (fund a NASA mission to Jupiter) or they can support or oppose a portion of a bill that is currently pending before Congress or their state legislature. In both cases, the students must support their solution with data and examples from at least two outside sources (books, journals, reliable internet sources) and discuss why their solution is better than other options. All outside research must be properly cited.

Basic Letter Writing Tips

- The first step in writing a letter to an elected official is to identify the student’s elected official and their address. Since they will be urging their elected official to support or oppose a legislative solution, they will want to select the official who will be most responsive to their letter. The following website will help them identify their federal or state elected officials. [http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml](http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml)

- The student must address the letter correctly.

- The letter must begin with the phrase "Dear Representative (last name)" or Dear Senator (last name)."

- The letter should begin with a sentence that tells the elected official exactly what the student wants them to do. The first sentence in the letter on page 5 provides an example.

- The letter should contain the student’s mailing address so that the elected official can confirm them as a constituent and the elected official can write back.

- The student must sign and date their letter.

Guidelines: All letters must meet the following guidelines:

- No student who participated in a previous D4D National Conference can be selected as a student delegate unless their letter to an elected official is selected for the legislative hearing.

- Student delegates who presented in a previous legislative hearing cannot be chosen as student delegates or submit a letter to an elected official.

- No student can co-author more than one letter.

- The body of the letter may not exceed 1000 words (excluding footnotes).

- All primary and secondary sources used in preparing the proposal must be cited.

- The letter must be on a state or federal issue. Letters on local issues will not be eligible. The majority of local issues are also important federal and state issues.

(guidelines continued on next page)
Two or more students must work on the letter.

A copy of the letter must be mailed to each student’s elected official by February 4, 2013.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

The following resources will assist the student in writing their letter:

- A letter written by students at Earlham College that was selected as the winner at the 2012 D4D Legislative Hearing appears on pages 5-8. **This letter is an excellent model.** The five letters that were selected for the 2012 legislative hearing can be viewed at [http://www.projectpericles.org](http://www.projectpericles.org)

- THOMAS was launched in January of 1995, at the inception of the 104th Congress. The website provides detailed federal legislative information to the public. [http://thomas.loc.gov/](http://thomas.loc.gov/)

- C-SPAN is a private, non-profit company, created in 1979 by the cable television industry as a public service. Its mission is to provide public access to the political process. The C-SPAN website contains a wealth of information including video of Congressional hearings related to a number of federal policy issues. [http://www.c-span.org](http://www.c-span.org)

- National Journal Group is the leading source of nonpartisan reporting on the current political environment and emerging policy trends. [http://www.nationaljournal.com/njonline/](http://www.nationaljournal.com/njonline/)

- The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. The NCSL website provides research and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. [http://www.ncsl.org/](http://www.ncsl.org/)
The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand  
478 Russell Senate Office Building  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510  

February 6, 2012  

Dear Senator Gillibrand,  

We write to urge you to continue your support for Congress’ agreement to a sequestration provision in the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011 which would tactically reduce the Pentagon’s budget if the super committee did not reach an agreement, and furthermore use the money saved to prevent cuts to education. The plan laid out by President Obama and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, which would trim $500 billion over the next ten years, does not go far enough to fixing this country’s financial problems.\(^1\) Under the Panetta plan, in 10 years the Pentagon budget would still be larger than it is today.\(^2\) A $1 trillion reduction plan is necessary to bring back military spending in this country to a reasonable level. This would be accomplished by following through with the BCA instead of repealing it and combine that effort with the Panetta plan. This substantial reduction is feasible, as shown by the nonpartisan Sustainable Defense Task Force’s report “Debt, Deficits, & Defense: A Way Forward.”\(^3\) Not only is it feasible, but it would also not affect national security, as substantial reductions can be made in programs that are not necessary for national security, such as extraneous military bases, unutilized weapons projects, and an oversupply of nuclear weapons.

Of all the agencies of government, the military can afford to be cut the deepest as it currently accounts for half of the discretionary budget and has grown excessive amounts, particularly over the last ten years.\(^4\) The strongest, most secure and most influential nations in the world are those with the strongest economies, so use the money taken from military spending to prevent cuts from the more economically responsible investments

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http://fcnl.org/issues/checkbook/military_spending_charting_the_future/

http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/1006SDTFreport.pdf

www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2011/assets/hist08z9.xls
for America’s future, such as education. School budgets and higher education scholarships, which were already
underfunded before the economic downturn, have taken a large share of government cuts. If the concern is
about protecting America and its future, these are the wrong programs to slash. Educational investments result
in 2.5 times more employment opportunities than military investments. While some jobs would be lost as a
result of reductions to the military budget, many more jobs are lost when the same amount of money is taken
from educational programs. Multiple studies have reported likewise.

As college students, we understand the value of higher education, but we also recognize the prohibitive costs
that make higher education unfeasible for far too many American families. We have witnessed our friends
unable to return each year due to an inability to pay. This is why we ask you to support legislation to reduce our
country’s military spending and save, if not even bolster, our current spending on education. As you have said,“Investing in education is the most important investment we can make.”

Affordable Reductions to the Military Budget

Many U.S. military projects are antiquated and extraneous, relics of the Cold War that are no longer necessary
for our security. As laid out by the Sustainable Defense Task Force, we can save billions of dollars by reducing
unnecessary high-cost weapons development projects, shrinking our nuclear warhead stockpile, and decreasing
our number of overseas bases. The original purposes for most of these programs were in response to threats that
no longer exist today. As the Task Force wrote, “we seem increasingly in a race with ourselves.” We continue
to develop weapons and support bases for which there is no respective enemy, determined to be the strongest by
huge margins. None of these reductions would be detrimental to national security concerns.

Much of the last decade’s increase in military spending has been on military contractors in Afghanistan and
Iraq. Currently, more than half of the Pentagon’s budget has been dedicated to private contractors, a large

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proportion of which are not American.\textsuperscript{10} The Congressional Research Service recently counted 155,000 contractor personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq, compared to 145,000 uniformed personnel. Of these 155,000 Department of Defense contractors, 115,000 are not American citizens but rather are local or third-party nationals.\textsuperscript{11} Notably, since reducing military spending has been on the table, the loudest advocates against this have been military contractors.\textsuperscript{12} Rather than subsidizing foreign military contractors, we need to be subsidizing education domestically, which both builds a new generation of thinkers and exchanges foreign jobs for domestic ones.

\textit{Effects on New York Citizens}

Due to the ever-increasing defense budget, the current federal budget is not meeting the needs of the people of New York. Your support of education through your sponsorship of such bills as the Keep Our Educators Working Act and the College Affordability Tax Relief Act has been invaluable, but New York schools continue to suffer.\textsuperscript{13} With cuts across the board from after-school programs to teacher positions, we are sacrificing our students’ futures. Money from excess military expenses should instead be used to maintain education funding, saving thousands of jobs and building the foundation for future success.

One of the thorniest issues that arises when discussing cutting military spending is how it will affect our veterans. We agree that those who have served our country should retain their benefits, and hundreds of billions of dollars can still be cut from the Pentagon’s budget without negatively affecting veterans at all, through the ending of programs that we have already mentioned.\textsuperscript{14} A vote for decreasing military spending is not a vote against our nation’s veterans.

\textit{Conclusion}


\textsuperscript{13} The Office of Kirsten Gillibrand. “Education.” http://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/issues/education

We believe that you, as a member of the Armed Services Committee, occupy a unique place in our federal government to steer the discussion towards smarter spending. We urge you to follow through with the agreed expenditure reductions laid out by the Budget Control Act of 2011 to help position America for a better and more secure future. The future leaders of tomorrow need the support you can give them today.

Sincerely,

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