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# The U.S. debt is a big problem and these Mesa college students want a fix

**Russ Wiles, Arizona Republic** Published 6:00 a.m. MT Dec. 14, 2018



(Photo: Courtesy of Duane Oakes)

The national debt might be the biggest economic problem of our time — and a thorny issue with which few politicians want to deal.

But someone will need to start addressing it eventually, and about two dozen Mesa Community College students are trying to keep the conversation going.

Their hope is to raise awareness about the ballooning federal debt — now nearing \$22 trillion — at a time when most Americans aren't giving it a second thought.

"Students are shocked — for many, it's the first time they have heard of it," said Racheal Mangini, a 58-year-old Mesa Community College student who is participating in the awareness effort through a national campus initiative called Up to Us ([itsuptous.org](http://itsuptous.org)).

Their focus has been on educating Millennials and other young adults, as they are the generations that will be inheriting the debt in a couple decades.

The Mesa college students have done this in several ways including classroom presentations, distributing "Scary National Debt" fact cards, a game day where students were quizzed about the national debt and an exhibit at this month's Arizona Summit on Volunteerism and Civic Engagement.

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The Mesa group delivered the message this semester to more than 1,700 people, mostly other students.

Up to Us describes itself as a nonpartisan movement of young adults designed to raise awareness about the federal debt and the nation's fiscal challenges. It was launched in 2012 by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, Net Impact and the Clinton Global Initiative University.

It claims to have reached about one-quarter million people in person over that period.

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The Mesa students say their message has elicited various reactions, including frustration and surprise.

"In their minds, (most Americans) see this as a rich nation," said Mangini, who came here from the Caribbean island of Trinidad. "It surprises many that this country is drowning in debt."



Interest on U.S. debt is projected to total \$7 trillion over the next decade and, by 2026, will become the third largest category of the federal budget, according to the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. (Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, AP)

## Scope of the debt problem

The federal debt — representing years of accumulated annual deficits — is as old as the United States itself. But it has been rising sharply in recent decades, and the red ink already has grown to levels that are difficult to comprehend.

"It's such a big problem that many people don't think they can do anything about it," said Ivan Quintana, 21, another Mesa college student.

For example, one Scary National Debt fact card notes that 1 trillion \$10 bills, if taped end to end, would wrap around the globe more than 380 times — but would pay off less than half the red ink.

While worrisome debt headlines surface from time to time, the financial markets largely have ignored the ramifications. When Standard & Poor's downgraded the U.S. federal credit rating in 2011, the markets yawned. But as Greece's debt crisis showed, creditors and investors eventually do take notice, and the result can be painful austerity measures.

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Government debt figures often are compared to the size of each country's economy. Greece's debt, at 188 percent, represents a larger share of that nation's Gross Domestic Product than is the case in the U.S., but the numbers here aren't great.

The U.S. debt currently sits at about 106 percent of GDP, according to the International Monetary Fund, implying that it would take about a year's worth of economic output to pay it off, if everything was devoted to this one purpose — an unrealistic scenario.

Among larger economies, Japan has the highest government debt at 238 percent of GDP. Other notable nations with debt ratios above 100 percent include Italy and Portugal. The ratios of most prosperous nations are over 50 percent.

This year's annual U.S. deficit is projected at just under \$1 trillion.



Americans are certain to feel the pain of the rising national debt and the federal deficit if they continue on their current trajectory, financial experts warn. (Photo: Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images)

## Debating trade-offs

Both American political parties have had a role in spending more than the federal government generates in taxes and other revenue. Yet politics can be a divisive factor.

"Whenever we raise the national-debt issue, a lot of people think we're trying to blame someone or a political party specifically," said Shelby Lynch, a 19-year-old Mesa college student who also is participating in the Up to Us campaign.

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People also have widely different opinions on which federal programs should be cut and which ones funded in full. One of the Up to Us awareness activities for the Mesa students was to have people indicate their favorite programs by placing pennies in various cups representing those areas.

Education and health care were the favored choices of many students, based on this informal exercise.

The Up to Us campaign encourages students at various colleges and universities around the nation to devise interesting activities to raise awareness. Arizona State University is one of several dozen other schools with a team.

"People get very passionate about it," said Kim Morrow, 50, another Mesa college student.

"They start discussing whether we should take money away from certain programs such as Social Security or health care," she said. "It encourages deep critical thinking."

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Students participating in the Up to Us program say the effort has made them more conscious of the debt. Several said they are motivated to become more active with politics, including voting, tracking politicians' voting records and sending messages to elected officials expressing their views.

"You have to continue," Morrow said. "You can't just pretend the problem doesn't exist."

Reach the reporter at [russ.wiles@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:russ.wiles@arizonarepublic.com) or 602-444-8616.

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