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**Should We Defuse The “Tax Bomb” Facing Lawyers Who Are Enrolled In  
Income-Based Student Loan Repayment Plans?**

**IHELG Monograph**

**15-10**

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SHOULD WE DEFUSE THE “TAX BOMB” FACING  
LAWYERS WHO ARE ENROLLED IN INCOME-BASED  
STUDENT LOAN REPAYMENT PLANS?

by

Gregory Crespi

(Preliminary working paper)

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## ABSTRACT

Starting in 2032 thousands of mid-career lawyers who have previously incurred large student loan debts, and who unfortunately have been able to earn only relatively modest annual incomes in the 20 or 25 years following their law school graduation, will be subject each year to large cancellation of indebtedness-based federal and sometimes also state income tax obligations. These obligations will result because a large portion of the substantial student loan debts that have been incurred by many law school graduates will eventually be forgiven under one or another variant of the increasingly popular federal Income-Based Repayment Plan (“IBR Plan”) in which those persons have enrolled after their graduation, and those forgiven debts will then be treated under the Internal Revenue Code as taxable income.

These tax bills will often be in the neighborhood of \$50,000 to \$100,000 or even larger for those lawyers that have enrolled in the recently implemented Pay As You Earn (PAYE) version of the IBR Plan, and in the neighborhood of perhaps \$15,000 to \$25,000 for those lawyers who have enrolled in the earlier-established “old IBR” version of the IBR Plan. Many of these lawyers will likely have failed to adequately provide for this large tax obligation and will find that it will impair or even devastate their retirement plans.

The phrase “tax bomb” is an apt one to describe this large tax obligation that will be imposed on income that is attributed to but not actually received by a relatively small group of taxpayers. This article explains how this tax bomb was created and how the various statutes and regulations that define its scope and size have evolved over time from the original 2007 implementation of the original IBR Plan up through the Department of Education’s proposed new Revised Pay as You Earn Plan (“REPAYE Plan”) rules that will be in force as of December of 2015. It then offers detailed illustrative calculations regarding its magnitude for both PAYE Plan and old IBR Plan law graduate enrollees, both for typical individual enrollees and in the aggregate. Given an underlying assumption that Plan law graduate enrollees will experience average annual growth in their “real” incomes in the years after their Plan enrollment of 2%/year, my estimate is that the aggregate impact of the tax bomb on lawyers alone will be about \$86 million in 2032 and \$217 million in 2033, and then will grow rapidly to over \$900 million per year by 2038 and will remain close that amount in each year thereafter. Its impact will be

even larger, perhaps significantly so, if the comparable and generally smaller tax obligations that will be imposed on medical school graduates and other graduate and professional school borrower enrollees, and on enrollees who have borrowed only for undergraduate studies, are also considered.

Finally, the article discusses whether measures should be taken to mitigate or even eliminate this tax bomb before these obligations begin coming due in 2032. I have concluded that no such measures are justified except for a minor amendment to the Internal Revenue Code allowing persons to pay their tax liabilities on forgiven student loan debt over a period of several years. However, I also discuss several other alternative measures that might be taken to reduce the tax bomb's consequences, including the amendment of the Internal Revenue Code to abolish these consequences altogether.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Starting in 2032 each year thousands of mid-career lawyers who have previously incurred large student loan debts, and who unfortunately have been able to earn only a relatively modest annual income in the 20 or 25 years following their law school graduation, will be subject to large cancellation of indebtedness-based federal income tax obligations, and sometimes also smaller but still significant comparable state income tax obligations. These combined federal and state tax bills for one group of these lawyers will often be in the neighborhood of \$50,000 to \$100,000, and in some instances even larger than this, and for another group of lawyers will often be in the \$10,000 to \$25,000 range. Many of these lawyers will likely have failed to adequately provide for this large tax obligation and will find that it will impair their retirement plans. In addition, each year a larger group of tens of thousands of people who have incurred loan debts of up to \$50,000 or more to finance Ph.D. work or other non-legal graduate or professional studies, or undergraduate coursework, and who over the following two decades or more have also unfortunately been able to earn only relatively modest annual incomes, will also face cancellation of indebtedness-based income tax bills. While these latter tax bills will usually not be of the same order of magnitude as the large obligations

facing many lawyers they could in some instances still be large enough to also cause substantial hardship.

I believe that the phrase “tax bomb” is an apt description of such a large tax obligation that will be imposed on income that is attributed to but not actually received by a relatively small group of taxpayers. This tax bomb will result from the fact that a large portion of the loan debts that have been incurred by many students, and especially by many law students, and that will eventually be forgiven under one or another variant of the increasingly popular Income-Based Repayment Plan (which I will hereafter refer to collectively as the “Plans”) will be treated under the Internal Revenue Code (the “Code”) as taxable income in the year in which they are discharged.

In this article I will explain how this tax bomb was created and how the various statutes and regulations that define its scope and size have evolved over time. I will then discuss when these tax obligations will come due under each of these several Plans, and then offer some detailed illustrative calculations regarding the magnitude of the tax bomb’s impact upon many lawyers, both individually and in the aggregate.<sup>1</sup> I will also discuss whether measures should be taken to mitigate

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<sup>1</sup> As noted above in the main text this cancellation of indebtedness-based tax liability will impact not only law school graduates, but also many other persons who have enrolled in one or another of the various Plans to repay loans taken out to finance other forms of graduate school or

or even eliminate this tax bomb before these obligations begin coming due in the 2032, and I will propose and discuss several alternative legislative and administrative measures that might be taken alone or in combination to accomplish this end if that is determined to be the preferred alternative.

In Part II of this article I will discuss the relevant aspects of the two existing variants of the Income-Based Repayment Plan (hereafter referred to as the “old IBR Plan” and the “new IBR Plan,” respectively), as well as those of the closely-related Pay As You Earn Plan (hereafter referred to as the “PAYE Plan”), and of the still-under-development Revised Pay As You Earn Plan (hereafter referred to as the “REPAYE Plan”) that is scheduled to become available for borrower enrollment starting in December of 2015. In Part III of the article I will discuss the Code provisions that will impose this cancellation of indebtedness tax obligation on enrollees in these Plans when their remaining unpaid debts are forgiven.

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professional training, and/or to finance their undergraduate studies. However, for reasons that I will later discuss in this article it will be much more difficult to estimate the size of the tax bomb impact upon these other borrowers than it will be for law graduate borrowers, and both the individual and aggregate impacts will generally be much smaller for these other classes of borrowers than for law graduates. I will therefore in this article focus only upon law graduate enrollees. The reader should recognize that the overall scope of the tax bomb will be somewhat larger, and perhaps significantly larger, than its impact upon lawyers alone. I will leave the analysis of the overall impact of the tax bomb upon all affected enrollees in one or another of the various Plans for another day.

In Part IV of the article I will analyze the impact of the tax bomb on law school graduates (hereafter “law graduates”) who have enrolled in one or another of these Plans. I will first discuss the time frame under which these tax obligations will come due as Plan enrollees under each of these Plans eventually qualify for debt forgiveness. While the available information is not sufficient to offer with any real confidence precise estimates of the size of the tax bomb problem for affected individuals and in the aggregate, I will do what I can with the limited data that exists and will present what are concededly somewhat speculative but hopefully realistic and useful illustrative calculations regarding: 1) how large the individual tax bills are likely to be for typical law school graduate enrollees, under each of the various Plans, 2) how many law graduate enrollees under each of the various Plans will be impacted by the tax bomb each year, and 3) how large the aggregate annual tax bill imposed on law graduates is likely to be, starting in 2032 when the earliest old IBR Plan enrollees and PAYE enrollees reach the end of their required repayment periods and qualify for forgiveness of any remaining debts, and then in each following year.

Having offered estimate of the impacts of the tax bomb in Part V I will then consider the policy issues it presents. I will offer my concluding recommendation that no action be taken to eliminate or mitigate its consequences except for a minor

amendment to the Code that would allow those persons subject to debt forgiveness tax liability due to discharged student loan debt to pay those taxes over a several-year period, rather than in the year of debt forgiveness, without undue penalty.

However, this is a close question on which reasonable persons can disagree, and I will therefore also discuss several other alternative legislative or regulatory measures by which the tax bomb might be partially or wholly defused. Part VI of the article will present a brief overall conclusion.

## II. EVOLUTION OF THE INCOME-BASED REPAYMENT PLANS FROM THE “OLD” IBR PLAN THROUGH THE REPAYE PLAN

Since 2007 the federal government has offered a growing set of relatively generous loan repayment alternatives for persons who have incurred federally-provided or federally-guaranteed student loan debt. In that year Congress established the original old IBR Plan.<sup>2</sup> That Plan provides eligible borrowers with loan repayment and debt forgiveness terms which are substantially more attractive than are the terms of an earlier and less generous effort to offer borrowers an income-contingent loan repayment option through the Income-Contingent Repayment Plan.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, the old IBR Plan requires enrollees to make monthly payments that are only equal to 15% of the difference between the

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2 College Cost Reduction and Access Act, Pub. L. No. 110-84, Section 203, 121 Stat. 784, 792-94 (2007).

3 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-66, Section 4021, 107 Stat. 346 (1993). The Income-Contingent Repayment Plan requires borrowers to make repayments of 20% of their discretionary income, and requires those repayments to be made for 25 years before the remaining debt is forgiven, and allows married borrowers who file separate tax returns to use only their own income and not their spouse’s income to determine the size of their repayment obligation. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_. For further discussion of the Income-Contingent Repayment Plan *see generally* Phillip G. Schrag, “The Federal Income-Contingent Repayment Option for Law Student Loans,” 29 Hofstra L. Rev. 733, 764-74 (\_\_\_\_).

The number of persons making loan repayments under the Income-Contingent Repayment Plan decreased slightly from 630,000 in the third quarter of 2013 to 600,000 in the second quarter of 2014, and has remained at that 600,000 level through the start of the second quarter of 2015, showing that there have been few if any new enrollments in that Plan over the past year-and-a-half now that more generous loan repayment Plans are available. “Direct Loan Portfolio by Repayment Type,” Department of Education, National Student Loan Data System (2015).

enrollee's adjusted gross income and 150% of the poverty level income for a family of the enrollee's family size (this difference is hereinafter referred to as the enrollee's "discretionary income"), no matter how large their debt,<sup>4</sup> and does not require a married enrollee who files a separate tax return from that of their spouse to include their spouse's income in calculating the size of their monthly repayment obligation.<sup>5</sup> It also adds to the enrollee's debt obligation but does not capitalize into interest-earning principal any unpaid loan interest,<sup>6</sup> and forgives any remaining debt owing after 25 years of repayments.<sup>7</sup>

The original terms of the old IBR Plan were made more generous in 2012 for some but not all IBR Plan-eligible borrowers through the issuance of the Department of Education's ("DOE") PAYE rules, therefore creating a second loan repayment Plan (hereafter the "PAYE Plan").<sup>8</sup> The most important differences

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<sup>4</sup> See *supra* n. 2 at \_\_\_\_\_. This requirement is subject to the caveat that if an enrollee no longer has a "partial financial hardship" in that the size of his required monthly repayments under the 15% of discretionary income formula has grown to where it exceeds the amount that he would have owed to repay his debt under a standard 10-year repayment schedule, the enrollee will only for the remainder of the required repayment period have to make payments equal to that required by a standard 10-year repayment schedule. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_. This point is subject to two caveats. First, for the first three years after enrollment the federal government will pay any accrued unpaid interest due on subsidized Direct Loans. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_. Second, if an enrollee at some point in time no longer has a "partial financial hardship" then at that time any accrued unpaid interest will be capitalized into loan principal and will bear interest for the remainder of the required repayment period. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>8</sup> See generally Federal Perkins Loan Program, Federal Family Education Loan Program, and William D. Ford Loan Program, 77 Fed. Reg. 66,088 (Nov. 1, 2012) (codified at

between the PAYE Plan and the old IBR Plan are that the PAYE Plan enrollees are required to make payments of only 10% of their discretionary income rather than 15% as under the old IBR Plan,<sup>9</sup> and now must make those payments for only 20 years rather than 25 years as under the old IBR Plan before any remaining unpaid debt is forgiven.<sup>10</sup> However, importantly not all persons that are eligible to enroll in the old IBR Plan are also eligible for the PAYE Plan,<sup>11</sup> nor are all federal loans that are eligible for repayment under the old IBR Plan also eligible for repayment under the PAYE Plan.<sup>12</sup>

Congress also in 2010 legislation<sup>13</sup> made more generous the terms of the original old IBR Plan in a manner that matches the 10% of discretionary income and 20-year repayment period terms of the later-implemented PAYE Plan, but these more generous terms are only available for those IBR Plan-eligible persons

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34 C.F.R. Section 685.209(a) (2012). The PAYE Plan is perhaps best regarded as simply an administrative acceleration, under the authority of the statute enacting the earlier Income-Contingent Repayment Plan, of the implementation of the “new IBR” plan that under 2010 Congressional legislation, *infra* n. 13, was set to go into effect on July 1, 2014 for those IBR-eligible persons who were also “new” borrowers as of that latter date. *See infra* n. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at \_\_\_\_.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at \_\_\_\_.

<sup>11</sup> Enrollment in the PAYE Plan is currently only available to borrowers who took out their loans after October 1, 2007, and who have received a disbursement of a loan after October 1, 2011. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_.

<sup>12</sup> Only Direct Loans and consolidated Federal Family Education Loans are eligible for PAYE Plan repayment. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_.

<sup>13</sup> Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-152, Sections 2201-2213, 124 Stat. 1029, 1081 (2010).

who are also “new” federal student loan borrowers as of July 1, 2014,<sup>14</sup> thereby establishing another loan repayment option which I will hereafter refer to as the “new IBR” Plan. Most law graduates, however, will not be able to make use of the new IBR Plan until at least 2017.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, yet another loan repayment option will be created by the implementation of the DOE’s proposed new REPAYE Plan, with the rules to govern that Plan having been agreed to on April 30, 2015 by designated DOE officials and outside negotiators who participated in a negotiated DOE rulemaking process, and which are expected to be finalized in essentially their current form by November 1, 2015.<sup>16</sup> The proposed REPAYE Plan is the result of a rulemaking process that was initiated to implement President Obama’s June, 2014 directive to the DOE to substantially expand the eligibility for the PAYE Plan to also include a large group of millions of “old” borrowers that are eligible for enrollment in the

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14 *Id. at* \_\_\_\_\_. This new IBR Plan is available only to those IBR-eligible borrowers who are also “new” borrowers as of July 1, 2014 in that they had no outstanding Direct Loans or Federal Family Education Loans at that time.

15 The first group of law graduates who will be able to make use of the new IBR Plan will be those persons who first enrolled in law school and took out their first federal student loans after July 1, 2014 in the fall of 2014 for the 2014-2015 academic year, and who then graduate from law school three years later in 2017.

16 “Draft Proposed Modifications to Existing Regulations” (04/30/2015) [DOE’s REPAYE rules, cite to latest 4/30/2015 version]

old IBR Plan but that were not previously eligible to enroll in the more generous PAYE Plan, and to focus the benefits of the new Plan on struggling borrowers.<sup>17</sup>

The REPAYE Plan's substantive rules are accompanied by some technical conforming amendments to certain other DOE rules that relate to the IBR or PAYE Plans,<sup>18</sup> but the REPAYE Plan importantly leaves open as options for eligible borrowers the ability to enroll in any of these other Plans.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the REPAYE Plan will only add another debt repayment option to the existing menu of choices rather than replace any or all of these other Plans.

The REPAYE Plan if implemented as now proposed will differ in important ways from each of the existing Plans. First of all, it embraces the PAYE Plan and new IBR Plan provisions that require enrollees to make payments of only 10% of

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17 Jeff Appel (Deputy Under Secretary, Department of Education), "Opening Remarks," Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Extension Negotiated Rulemaking Committee Meetings (Feb. 24, 2015).

18 [cite to 4/30/2015 REPAYE rules]

19 The DOE could presumably have drafted the REPAYE Plan rules to also apply to future PAYE Plan enrollees under the discretion given to the DOE by the legal authority conferred by the statutes creating the Income-Contingent Repayment Plan, and in reliance upon which the original PAYE Plan rules were issued, *see* 77 Fed. Reg. 42086-01, 42099 (2013) (claiming authority for the PAYE rules under Section 455(d)(1)(D) of the Higher Education Act, 20 U.S.C. Section 1089e(d)(1)(D)), but it chose not to do so. It would have been much more problematic for the DOE to attempt to have the REPAYE Plan rules also apply to future old IBR Plan and new IBR Plan enrollees without additional Congressional authorization of such action, given the separate and arguably more restrictive statutes that establish the IBR Plans. But by proposing the REPAYE Plan only as a new Plan established under the Higher Education Act, and that leaves unaltered and still available for borrower enrollment all of the prior IBR Plans, the DOE has avoided any possible legal controversies in this regard. Conversation with Heather Jarvis (June 11, 2015).

their discretionary income, rather than the substantially larger 15% of discretionary income that is required under the old IBR Plan.<sup>20</sup> Second, it utilizes the old IBR Plan’s broad eligibility criteria rather than the more restrictive PAYE Plan eligibility criteria, thereby making eligible for enrollment a large group of approximately five million “old” student loan borrowers who are not eligible for enrollment under the PAYE Plan or the new IBR Plan.<sup>21</sup> Third, the REPAYE Plan will require a loan repayment period of 25 years prior to debt forgiveness, matching the old IBR Plan repayment period requirement, for those enrollees who have taken out graduate or professional school loans (and perhaps also undergraduate loans) rather than only undergraduate loans, while requiring only a 20-year loan repayment period prior to debt forgiveness, matching that repayment period imposed by the PAYE and new IBR Plans, for those enrollees who have taken out only undergraduate loans.<sup>22</sup> Fourth, only one-half of the unpaid loan

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20 *See supra* n. 16 at \_\_\_\_.

21 *Id.* at \_\_\_\_ . For 2011-12, the latest year for which statistics are available, there were a total of 3,732,875 Associate’s Degrees, Bachelor’s Degrees, Master’s Degrees and Doctoral Degrees awarded, [NCES cite] of which 44,495 were JD or LLB law degrees, approximately 1.2% of that total. [ABA cite]. Therefore approximately 1.2% of the 5 million persons who will become eligible for REPAYE Plan enrollment – approximately 60,000 persons – will be law graduates.

22 *See supra* n. 16 at \_\_\_\_ . The initial proposed change considered by the REPAYE negotiators was to have a 20-year repayment period for borrowers whose loan debt was \$57,500 or less, and 25 years for borrowers whose loans exceeded this amount. During the April 28-30, 2015 negotiations, however, this original loan size restriction was changed to the current provision imposing a 20-year repayment period for borrowers with only undergraduate loans, and 25 years for borrowers with graduate or professional school loans (and perhaps also

interest that accrues for enrollees during those periods of negative amortization when their required repayments are not sufficient to pay the interest owing on their loans will be added to their debt, rather than all of that unpaid interest as is now done under the IBR and PAYE Plans.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the REPAYE rules will now require all married enrollees, even those who file separate tax returns from those of their spouse, to now use the couple's combined income for calculating the size of the required monthly repayments, rather than as is now permitted under the IBR and PAYE Plans for a borrower who files their taxes separately to utilize their income alone for those calculations.<sup>24</sup> I will in this article conduct my illustrative calculations under the assumption that the proposed REPAYE Plan rules will be adopted in essentially their current form by the end of 2015 and will apply to any persons electing to enroll in the REPAYE Plan starting in 2016, but will not apply to any existing or future IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees.

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undergraduate loans). Michael Stratford, "Income-Based Repayment Expansion Advances," \_\_\_\_\_ (May 1, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> See *supra*. n. 16 at \_\_\_\_\_. Under the PAYE and IBR Plans there are provisions under which the federal government will pay any unpaid interest accruing on subsidized Direct Loans for the first three years after enrollment. [give cites] However, such subsidized loans have not been made available to law students since 2012, and were never available for more than a relatively small proportion of typical law student loan debt, so I will ignore this minor unpaid interest accrual complication in my later illustrative calculations. This particular REPAYE Plan provision to charge borrowers with only one-half of any unpaid interest also raises a potential issue as to whether the forgiveness of the remainder of the unpaid interest creates a tax liability for the enrollee in the year that it is not paid. See *infra* Part II.

<sup>24</sup> See *supra*. n. 16 at \_\_\_\_\_.

There is a fairly substantial literature that considers the financial problems currently facing many law schools, and which assesses the significance of the IBR Plans and the PAYE Plan for legal education.<sup>25</sup> I myself have contributed to that literature with a recent article that attempts to comprehensively assess the consequences of these Plans and of the closely-related and even more generous Public Service Loan Forgiveness Plan (“PSLF Plan”)<sup>26</sup> for law graduates and for the financial viability of legal education in the coming years.<sup>27</sup> That article

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25 For comprehensive discussion of the difficult financial situation facing legal education see generally Brian Tamanaha, Failing Law Schools (2012); Paul Campos, Don’t Go to Law School (Unless) (2012); Richard W. Bourne, “The Coming Crash in Legal Education: How We Got Here, and Where We Go Now,” 45 Creigh. L. Rev. 651 (2012); Steven R. Smith, “Financing the Future of Legal Education: “Not What It Used To Be,” 2012 Mich St. L. Rev. 579 (2012). For a briefer summary of the problem see also Steven J. Harper, “Pop Goes the Law,” Chron. Rev., Mar. 11, 2013, at 1-3.

26 [PSLF Plan cite] Persons enrolling in the IBR or PAYE Plans are also eligible to enroll in the PSLF Plan. Under the PSLF Plan if the enrollee is employed by a qualified employer for 10 years then the remaining unpaid debt is forgiven, and under Code Section 108(f)(1) there is no tax liability imposed for that forgiven debt. The PSLF Plan thus provides a model for a possible Code amendment to eliminate altogether the tax bomb consequences, an amendment that I will discuss in Part V of the article *infra*.

27 Gregory Crespi, “Will the Income-Based Repayment Program Enable Law Schools to Continue to Provide ‘Harvard-Style’ Legal Education?,” 67 SMU L. Rev. 51 (2014) (hereinafter “Crespi (2014)”). One of my rather discouraging conclusions reached in that article was that due to the well-publicized sharply reduced demand for highly paid, entry-level law firm associates since 2008, a consequence of both cyclical and structural economic factors, along with the steady increases over recent decades in real law school tuitions, most law schools are now facing severe financial pressures from a substantial decline in the number and quality of their applicants, with a significant number of academically and financially weaker law schools likely to eventually have to close. *Id.* at 52. A second conclusion that I reached was that legal education is rapidly becoming increasingly dependent upon the indirect but quite substantial federal subsidy that law schools benefit from as a result of their students having access to the generous IBR and PLSF Plans’ repayment and debt forgiveness terms upon their graduation, with these students and prospective law school applicants thereby often being much less concerned than they otherwise would be with the amount of tuition they will have to pay. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_\_. If the IBR and/or the

provides considerable detail regarding the features of the IBR and PAYE Plans, and I will often refer to that earlier work in this article. The combined enrollment in the old and new IBR Plans has been rapidly increasing over the past couple of years,<sup>28</sup> and PAYE Plan enrollment has been increasing at an even more striking rate,<sup>29</sup> as these Plans' favorable terms have become more widely known to heavily indebted borrowers. Those Plans with their generous repayment and debt forgiveness terms have almost completely displaced the previously enacted Income Contingent Repayment Plan.<sup>30</sup>

Let me briefly explain when and how the tax bomb will be created by the old and new IBR Plans and PAYE Plans and now also by the REPAYE Plan. As discussed above, each Plan imposes its own required repayment period before forgiving any remaining unpaid debt. Under the PAYE Plan and the new IBR Plan

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PSLF Plans are ever legislatively amended to eliminate or even only significantly limit the ability of graduate students with large student loan debts to access these favorable terms the results for all but the most elite law schools would likely be little short of catastrophic. *Id.* at \_\_\_\_.

28 Enrollment in the IBR Plans has increased from 910,000 enrollees in the third quarter of 2013 to 2,330,000 enrollees by the start of the second quarter of 2015, an addition of 1,420,000 enrollees, a 156% increase in enrollment in only a year-and-three-quarters. Department of Education, National Student Loan Data System (2015).

29 Enrollment in the PAYE Plan has increased from only 40,000 enrollees to 530,000 enrollees over that same year-and-three quarters period, an addition of 490,000 enrollees, a 1,125% increase in enrollment over that period! *Id.*

30 The number of persons making loan repayments under the Income-Contingent Repayment Plan has decreased from 630,000 in the third quarter of 2013 to 600,000 in the second quarter of 2015, showing that there have been few if any new enrollments in that program over the past year-and-three-quarters. *Id.*

any remaining outstanding loan debt and accrued unpaid interest thereon is forgiven after the enrollee has made the required minimum repayments for 20 years. This required repayment period before debt forgiveness is instead 25 years under the old IBR Plan. The REPAYE Plan when it goes into effect in December of 2015 will impose a 25-year repayment period for those REPAYE enrollees who have taken out federal loans to finance graduate or professional school education (and possibly also undergraduate education) before any remaining debt is forgiven, and a 20-year repayment period prior to debt forgiveness for those enrollees who have taken out loans only to finance undergraduate studies. The tax bomb arises because under all of these Plans that forgiven debt is then treated by the Internal Revenue Code as cancellation of indebtedness income, as ordinary income that must be recognized in the year of debt forgiveness.<sup>31</sup>

As I have previously discussed at some length in my earlier article on the subject many law students now incur quite substantial six-figure federal loan debts that in some instances approach or even exceed \$200,000 when the interest that accrues on their loans once they are incurred, and before their repayments begin upon their Plan enrollment approximately six months after graduation, are added to

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31 *See infra* Part II.

the original loan debt.<sup>32</sup> The generous repayment terms of the IBR and PAYE Plans allow such high-debt enrollees with even fairly substantial incomes to make only relatively small monthly repayments that are insufficient for many years to even cover the interest owing on such large loan debts.<sup>33</sup> For many of these IBR and PAYE Plan enrollees their unpaid debt will as a result grow over time for many years after their enrollment due to this negative amortization, although this accrued unpaid interest will not be capitalized into interest-bearing principal under any of the Plans.<sup>34</sup> This negative amortization for some years after enrollment will also be the case for some REPAYE Plan enrollees, although usually not to nearly the same extent.<sup>35</sup>

As I will also later demonstrate with some hypothetical but hopefully realistic illustrative calculations, a large proportion of the PAYE Plan enrollees

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32 Crespi (2014), *supra* n. 27, at 74-6.

33 *Id.* at 85-8.

34 Under the IBR and PAYE Plans the federal government will pay on behalf of the enrollee any accrued and unpaid interest based upon subsidized federal loans for the first three years after enrollment, but as I have noted above little if any of the loan debt incurred by law graduates is subsidized debt that will qualify for this treatment, and I will therefore ignore this minor complication in my later illustrative calculations. *See supra* n. 23.

35 As I have noted earlier, however, under the new REPAYE rules that will go into force for new enrollees starting in December of 2015 only half of accrued unpaid interest will be added to the debt, and any spousal income must be included in determining the size of the required repayments, and the repayment period will be extended to 25 years. *See supra* n. 23. For both reasons the REPAYE Plan rules will therefore reduce the amount of accrued interest that would otherwise have been added to an enrollee's debt because of negative amortization due to inadequate loan repayments.

who have incurred loan debts to finance law school studies will as a result have over \$200,000 and perhaps even in some cases as much as \$300,000 or more of unpaid principal and accrued interest still owing and then forgiven at the end of the applicable 20-year repayment period.<sup>36</sup> Comparable old IBR Plan enrollees will have \$50,000 or more in unpaid debt at the end of their 25-year required repayment period.<sup>37</sup> With such a large amount of forgiven debt included in their income along with their other earnings for that tax year these persons will almost all be paying taxes on that forgiven debt at at least a 25% or 28% marginal federal income tax rate, and sometimes even a top-bracket 39.6% marginal federal income tax rate, on this additional attributed income.<sup>38</sup> In addition, many states also impose a state income tax on the income recognized by the federal government,<sup>39</sup> in some instances with relatively high upper-bracket marginal rates that would usually here apply given the large size of the debt forgiven.<sup>40</sup> For a PAYE Plan law graduate enrollee with a \$200,000 or larger unpaid debt at the time of their debt forgiveness this may well mean a combined federal and state income tax bill on this additional

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<sup>36</sup> See *infra* Part IV.C.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> These estimated tax rates on forgiven debt are based on the current federal and state tax brackets for various levels of income, and do not allow for upward adjustment in the income bracket lower cut-offs to reflect inflation over the next 20 or 25 years. If the probable periodic adjustments in the tax schedules to reflect annual inflation rates in the neighborhood of 3% are taken into account this would probably reduce the applicable tax rates to some extent, particularly for smaller amounts of forgiven debt.

<sup>39</sup> Crespi (2014), *supra* n. 27, at 90 n. 171.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

attributed income of around \$70,000 or more, and an enrollee with \$300,000 or more of forgiven debt may owe additional income taxes in the neighborhood of \$100,000 or even more. As I will later demonstrate the aggregate annual tax liability that will be borne by these IBR and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees with large student loan debts and later accrued unpaid interest, starting in 2032, could easily reach nine hundred million dollars per year or more by about 2038. 2030's could easily total several hundred million dollars per year or more.

Having to pay a substantial tax bill on forgiven debt is of course a much better position for a person to be in compared to their having to fully repay that debt. That being said, coming up with the funds necessary to satisfy such a large tax obligation that is based upon income attributed but not received will nevertheless be a substantial burden for many of those enrollees, particularly for those PAYE Plan enrollees who may have lacked the foresight to plan for this tax liability or who for other reasons have not made adequate provisions to set aside the funds necessary to meet this obligation. Payment of taxes of \$70,000 or more may well require significant depletion or even exhaustion of the savings that they have intended to cover their retirement expenses, and perhaps even the liquidation of their other savings and home equity.

This article will focus primarily upon the impact of the tax bomb upon those Plan enrollees who have obtained law school degrees and in so doing have incurred large six-figure student loan debts. I will not in this article attempt to estimate the amounts of individual and aggregate debt forgiveness tax liability that may each year face Plan enrollees who have incurred significant debts pursuing medical school or Ph.D. degrees or other non-legal graduate school or professional degrees.<sup>41</sup> Nor will I attempt to estimate the individual and aggregate debt

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41 *See supra* n. 1. I will, however, note in passing that those persons studying for MD degrees or MBA degrees who later enroll in one or another of these repayment Plans will generally be able to later earn sufficient income to largely or fully repay their student loan debts over the next 20 or 25 years, and thus will usually bear eventual debt forgiveness tax obligations. In addition, persons who study towards Ph.D. degrees or other advanced degrees outside of legal or medical or business education will generally incur far smaller debts than do most law or MD or MBA students since they are quite often able to avail themselves of tuition waivers, graduate assistant stipends, and/or outside grant funding to cover much of their expenses. If those latter persons subsequently enroll in one or another of the Plans they will generally be able to discharge their generally relatively small loan debts before the end of their repayment period. They will therefore not usually incur any debt forgiveness tax liability at the end of their repayment period.

There is, however, a great deal of variation in the amount of income people will be able to earn over the next 20 or 25 years after studying for and sometimes earning Ph.D. degrees or other non-legal graduate or professional degrees, and some Plan enrollees will not be so fortunate as to be able to fully repay their loan debt. One should not overlook the fact that the required monthly payments under the any of the Plans for a particular enrollee who has incurred perhaps a \$40,000 to \$50,000 loan debt for their graduate studies, and who then is unfortunately able to earn only a relatively modest annual income over the next 20 or 25 years after enrollment, or who must support a relatively large family, or both, may be so small that those payments may not even cover the interest owing on their loans. This also will lead to negative amortization of the loans and the building up of a fairly substantial debt to be forgiven at the end of the applicable 20- or 25-year repayment period. A forgiven debt in the neighborhood of \$50,000 or so will usually result in federal and state combined income tax liability that could easily be in the neighborhood of \$10,000 to \$15,000 or even somewhat larger. Tax obligations of such amounts, while not of the same order of magnitude as the much larger tax obligations that will be imposed on many

forgiveness tax liability that may each year face those Plan enrollees who have taken out student loans only to finance their undergraduate studies.<sup>42</sup> My illustrative calculations should therefore be regarded as only establishing an approximate “lower bound” for the total social impact of the tax bomb. More work

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PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees, will still be large enough to create significant hardships in some cases.

42 *See supra* n. 1. However, let me offer a few brief comments regarding the impact of the tax bomb upon Plan enrollees who have borrowed only to finance undergraduate studies. The federal government currently limits total federal student loan borrowing for studies in pursuit of undergraduate degrees to a total of \$57,500. 34 C.F.R. Section 685.203(e). Moreover, most undergraduate students who take out federal student loans borrow much less than this capped maximum amount. The majority of persons who borrow only to study towards undergraduate degrees and who later enroll in one or another of the Plans will also generally earn sufficient income to fully or almost fully repay their relatively small loans (when compared to the size of typical law graduate loans) during the applicable repayment period.

There is, however, a great deal of variation in the amount of income people will be able to earn over the next 20 or 25 years after studying for and sometimes earning undergraduate degrees, and some IBR and PAYE Plan enrollees will not be so fortunate as to be able to fully repay their loan debt. One should not overlook the fact that the required monthly payments under the Plans for a particular enrollee who has incurred perhaps a \$40,000 to \$50,000 loan debt for their undergraduate studies, and who then is unfortunately able to earn only a relatively modest annual income over the following decades after enrollment, or who must support a relatively large family, or both, will be so small that those payments may not even cover the interest owing on their loans. This also will lead to negative amortization of the loans and the building up of a fairly substantial debt to be forgiven at the end of the applicable 20- or 25-year repayment period. A forgiven debt in the neighborhood of \$50,000 or so will usually result in federal and state combined income tax liability that could easily be in the neighborhood of \$10,000 to \$15,000 or even somewhat larger.

Tax obligations of such amounts, while not of the same order of magnitude as the much larger tax obligations that will be imposed on many PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees, will still be large enough to create significant hardships in some cases. And given the relatively large number of Plan enrollees repaying only undergraduate debts, a fairly substantial number of enrollees that may eventually find themselves in this position and therefore the total federal and state debt forgiveness income taxes imposed annually on these enrollees could amount to a fairly substantial sum.

will need to be done to estimate the additional impacts of the tax bomb upon Plan enrollees other than law graduates in order to assess its overall social impact.

## II. THE INTERNAL REVENUE CODE PROVISIONS RELATING TO FORGIVEN STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Under Section 61(a)(12) of the Code a federal taxpayer must include in their gross income “income from discharge of indebtedness.”<sup>43</sup> Section 108 of the Code then provides for two exclusions that are here relevant that limit the scope of this required inclusion of discharged debt in gross income.<sup>44</sup> First of all, Sub-Section 108(f)(1) excludes discharged federal student loans from gross income if the terms of the loan provide for discharge of unpaid debt if the borrower “worked for a certain period of time in certain professions for any of a broad class of employers.”<sup>45</sup> This provision provides the basis for not imposing any debt forgiveness tax liability upon those persons who take out federal student loans that now generally so provide and then enroll in the PSLF Plan and subsequently work for any of a broadly-defined class of PSLF-qualified employers for at least 10 years.<sup>46</sup> Under the PSLF Plan after an enrollee makes 10 years of modest PAYE Plan-level monthly debt repayments (10% of the enrollee’s discretionary income) the often substantial remaining unpaid loan debt of the enrollee is discharged,<sup>47</sup> and under Code Sub-Section 108(f)(1) there is not imposed any income tax liability as

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43 Internal Revenue Code Section 61(1a)(12).

44 Internal Revenue Code Section 108.

45 Internal Revenue Code Section 108(f)(1).

46 [PSLF Plan cite]

47 [PSLF Plan cite]

a result of this debt discharge. This exclusion does not, however, extend to allow exclusion of discharged debt from gross income by IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees who have not worked for PSLF-qualified employers.<sup>48</sup>

Second, Code Sub-Sections 108(a)(1)(B) and 108(a)(3) together provide for a narrow insolvency exclusion from gross income that applies to the extent that the person whose debt was discharged is insolvent when the discharged debt is considered along with that person's other assets and liabilities.<sup>49</sup> In other words, to the extent that a person is balance-sheet insolvent at the time of debt discharge, when all of their assets and liabilities are considered, including the debt to be discharged, that portion of the discharged debt that puts that person into insolvency, which in some circumstances may include all of that discharged debt, will not give rise to income tax liability. However, for purposes of determining the applicability of this exclusion a person's assets are very broadly defined to include collectibles and personal property and those assets that serve as collateral for debts, as well as assets such as interests in pension plans or retirement accounts that are

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan M. Layman, "Comment: Forgiven But Not Forgotten: Taxation of Forgiven Student Loans Under the Income-Based-Repayment Plan," 39 Cap. U.L. Rev. 131, 151-55 (2011). Subsection 108(f)(1) also excludes from gross income forgiven loans that have been made to law students by law schools under their Loan Repayment Assistance Programs that also condition such forgiveness upon the borrower working for a certain minimum period of time in qualifying law-related public service positions. Revenue Ruling 2008-34 (Craig Wojay, Office of the Associate Chief Counsel, IRS). But such debts owed to law schools would not qualify for repayment through IBR or PAYE Plans.

<sup>49</sup> Internal Revenue Code Section 108.

beyond the reach of creditors, or the cash surrender value of life insurance policies.<sup>50</sup> The large majority of IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees will by 20 or 25 years after graduation probably have accumulated some significant assets by this very broad definition and are therefore not likely to benefit significantly if at all from this insolvency exclusion even if they have relatively large debts forgiven. I will therefore not take into account in my later illustrative calculations any possible effects on Plan enrollee tax liability that this exclusion may provide.

The provision of the proposed new REPAYE Plan that provides that the federal government will now charge only one-half of the unpaid interest to an IBR or PAYE enrollee's debt balance when the enrollee's payment is not sufficient to cover the interest owed on the outstanding loan balance raises a potential tax law issue. One could reasonably argue that the other half of the unpaid interest that is not added to the enrollee's outstanding loan balance should be characterized as forgiven debt that does not qualify for exclusion from gross income under Code Section 108, and that therefore should be regarded as taxable income in that year. Under this interpretation of the new REPAYE Plan rules that provision would not

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<sup>50</sup> Internal Revenue Service Publication 4681 at p. 5, and at the p. 9 "Insolvency Worksheet" (including among other items various forms of personal property, interests in retirement accounts and pension plans and the cash value of life insurance as relevant assets). One could perhaps challenge such a broad definition of what constitutes assets for the purposes of the insolvency exclusion as being in conflict with the general Congressional intent of linking the imposition of tax liabilities to a taxpayer's to ability to pay those taxes.

actually reduce an enrollee's debt forgiveness tax liability, but would merely accelerate some of that tax liability forward in time from the end of the required repayment period to the year in which that portion of the accrued but unpaid interest was not charged to the enrollee's debt. Such an interpretation of that provision would then burden student loan servicers with annually providing to all REPAYE Plan enrollees records as to the amount of unpaid interest that was not charged to their accounts each year, and also would require those enrollees to include those forgiven interest sums in their taxable income for that year. This would be a substantial administrative burden for both loan services and REPAYE Plan enrollees.

On the other hand, supporting an alternative interpretation of the new REPAYE Plan rules to not impose tax liability for this unpaid interest that is not charged to the borrower's outstanding loan balance is the fact that when under both the IBR and PAYE Plans the federal government pays any accrued but unpaid interest on subsidized (but not unsubsidized) federal loans for the first three years after Plan enrollment<sup>51</sup> that government payment is not now regarded as taxable income for the enrollee. This exemption from taxation here is presumably allowed on the basis of a distinction made between unpaid interest debts that have accrued

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51 [IBR and PAYE cites]

and been added to a person's debt obligation, but then are later forgiven, and interest debts that never initially accrue because another party makes the required interest payments when due on behalf of the borrower. This strikes me as a rather delicate and perhaps contestable distinction where as is the case for federal loans here the lender is also the person making the interest payments on behalf of the borrower. One could instead regard this process of "paying oneself interest" as equivalent to forgiving accrued debt. But given that this distinction has apparently so far sufficed as a basis to avoid imposing tax liability on IBR and PAYE Plan enrollees for unpaid interest on their subsidized loans for the first three years after their enrollment it would appear to extend with equal plausibility to the new situation of the government now not charging borrowers with one-half of their unpaid interest obligations after the first three years after enrollment under the new REPAYE Plan rules. For the remainder of this article I will therefore assume that unpaid interest that is not charged to an enrollee's account under the REPAYE Plan's rules will not be regarded as taxable income, either in the year that it was not paid or anytime thereafter including the year of final debt forgiveness.

Finally, as I will discuss more fully in Part V of this article one can immediately see that the tax bomb could be completely eliminated by a small but significant amendment of Code Sub-Section 108(f)(1) that would broaden the

current public service employment-based exclusion of forgiven debt from gross income to now also apply with regards to all Plan enrollees who make their required repayments for the entire 20- or 25-year required repayment period, regardless of their post-enrollment employment history.

#### IV. THE IMPACT OF THE TAX BOMB ON LAWYERS

The looming tax bomb is going to have its greatest impact on those law graduate Plan enrollees who have incurred large six-figure loan debts to finance their undergraduate and law school studies, but who later are able to earn only relatively modest incomes for the next 20 to 25 years after their graduation. Those persons will initially benefit greatly from their Plan enrollment because of the very modest monthly repayment obligations those Plans impose – which for many enrollees will for years be substantially less than even the interest accruing on their loan debts – but they will then later face significant debt forgiveness tax liabilities, particularly the PAYE Plan enrollees. I will therefore in this Part IV of the article focus exclusively on the circumstances of these law graduate Plan enrollees.

I will first of all identify the time frame under which law graduate enrollees in each of the several Plans will qualify for debt forgiveness and thereby possibly incur tax liability. I will then estimate the amount of tax liability that hypothetical “average” law graduates that are enrolled either the old IBR Plan or the PAYE Plan -- the two most heavily utilized Plans -- will bear after completing their required repayment period and having their remaining debts forgiven. After doing that, I will estimate how many law graduates have enrolled or will enroll each year over the next 15 years or so in one or another of these Plans and will then later

qualify for debt forgiveness. Finally, I will bring together these individual tax liability estimates for hypothetical average Plan enrollees with the estimates that have been made regarding how many enrollees in each Plan will qualify for debt forgiveness each year to project the aggregate amount of debt forgiveness tax liability that will be borne by Plan law graduate enrollees in each year for the fifteen years beginning in 2032. The reader should keep in mind that this aggregate debt forgiveness tax liability estimate will not include the tax liability that will be imposed upon many other Plan enrollees whose student loan debts financed non-law graduate or professional studies, or only undergraduate studies, and that it therefore should be regarded as only a very conservative “lower bound” estimate of the magnitude of the overall tax bomb.

#### A. The Time Frame for Obtaining Debt Forgiveness under each of the Plans.

Let me first separately identify the time frames under which the enrollees of each of the different Plans will become eligible for debt forgiveness. I will then combine those different Plan debt forgiveness schedules into a single over Plan debt forgiveness schedule.

##### 1. Old IBR Plan enrollees

The old IBR Plan first allowed eligible persons to enroll in 2007. Given the 25-year repayment period imposed by that Plan those initial 2007 enrollees, if they remain enrolled in the Plan and make all of their required repayments as scheduled, will qualify for debt forgiveness in 2032. Later 2008 enrollees will become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2033, 2009 enrollees will become eligible in 2034, and so on indefinitely.

## 2. PAYE Plan enrollees

The PAYE Plan first allowed eligible persons to enroll in 2012. Given the 20-year repayment period imposed by that Plan those initial 2012 enrollees, if they remain enrolled in the Plan and make all of their required repayments as scheduled, will also qualify for debt forgiveness in 2032. Later 2013 enrollees will become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2033, 2014 enrollees will become eligible in 2034, and so on indefinitely.

## 3. New IBR Plan enrollees

The new IBR Plan first allowed eligible persons to enroll in 2014. Given that only those persons who first took out federal student loans after July 1, 2014 are eligible to enroll in the new IBR Plan, the very first enrollees in that Plan are likely to enroll in 2015, and under the 20-year repayment period required by that

Plan if they remain enrolled in the Plan and make all of their required repayments they will qualify for debt forgiveness in 2035. However, the first law graduates who have at least partially financed each year of their three-year legal education with post-July 1, 2014 student loans will not be able to enroll until 2017,<sup>52</sup> and if they remain enrolled in the Plan and make all of their required repayments as scheduled they will later become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2037. Later 2018 law graduate enrollees will become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2038, 2019 law graduates will become eligible in 2039, and so on indefinitely.

#### 4. REPAYE Plan enrollees

The proposed REPAYE Plan is scheduled to be open for enrollment in 2016. Given the 25-year repayment period imposed by that Plan upon law graduate enrollees those initial 2016 law graduate enrollees, if they remain enrolled in the Plan and make all of their required repayments as scheduled, will qualify for debt forgiveness in 2041. Later 2017 enrollees will become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2042, 2018 enrollees will become eligible in 2043, and so on indefinitely.

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<sup>52</sup> These students will be persons who first enrolled in law school in the fall of 2014 with no outstanding undergraduate federal student loan debts, and then subsequently incurred post-July 1, 2014 loan debts for law school that left them eligible for new IBR enrollment, and then will graduate from law school in the spring of 2017 and enroll in the new IBR Plan later that same year

## 5. All Plan law graduate enrollees combined

Let me now combine these four different Plan debt forgiveness eligibility schedules into a single overall Plan schedule. The first cohorts of 2007 old IBR Plan law graduate enrollees and 2012 PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees will become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2032. The old IBR Plan enrollees who enrolled between 2008 and 2011 and the PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees who enroll or will enroll from 2013 through 2016 will become eligible for debt forgiveness in 2033 through 2036, respectively. In 2037 these old IBR Plan and Paye Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness will begin to be joined each year by a cohort of new IBR Plan law graduate enrollees who have enrolled in 2017 or later and have now also become eligible for debt forgiveness after 20 years of required repayments. Finally, in 2041 the enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness under one or another of these three Plans will begin to be joined each year by a cohort of REPAYE Plan law graduate enrollees who have enrolled in 2016 or later and who have now also become eligible for debt forgiveness after having satisfied their 25-year loan repayment obligations.

## B. The Distribution of Plan Enrollees Each Year Across the Various Plans.

As I will later demonstrate in some detail, the amount of debt forgiven and the consequent size of the income tax liability imposed on Plan enrollees is likely to be substantially greater for new IBR Plan and especially PAYE Plan enrollees than for old IBR Plan or REPAYE Plan enrollees who have comparable initial debt loads and comparable income profiles after enrollment, given the significantly smaller monthly repayments and shorter repayment periods required by those first two Plans compared to the other two Plans.<sup>53</sup> The aggregate amount of tax liability imposed on law graduate Plan enrollees that qualify for debt forgiveness each year will thus depend heavily upon the relative distribution of those qualifying enrollees across the different Plans. I will therefore spend some time analyzing the likely distribution of enrollments across these different Plans over the next decade or so.

There is likely to be a pronounced shift over time in the relative proportions of law graduate enrollees across these different Plans who will qualify for debt forgiveness each year between 2032 and the early 2040's. Let me explain why this will be the case. In 2032, the first year that some Plan enrollees will qualify for debt forgiveness, a large proportion of the enrollees who qualify will be old IBR Plan enrollees, and only a small proportion will be PAYE Plan enrollees. The reason for this is that while the PAYE Plan is clearly a preferred alternative over

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<sup>53</sup> In addition, the new IBR Plan and the PAYE Plan do not require the inclusion of spousal income in determining the size of the required repayments, as does the REPAYE Plan.

the old IBR Plan for law graduates, given the substantially lower required monthly repayments and significantly shorter required repayment period, relatively few persons who graduated from law school in 2012 or earlier meet the restrictive PAYE Plan eligibility requirement of having had no graduate or undergraduate federal student loans outstanding as of October 1, 2007. Most 2012 or earlier law graduates who wanted to enroll in a Plan in 2012 or earlier thus had no choice but to enroll in the old IBR Plan, so that the large majority of Plan law graduate enrollees who will qualify for debt forgiveness in 2032 will be 2007 old IBR Plan enrollees. However, with each year that passes after 2012 a new cohort of persons has graduated or will graduate from law school, and its members will on average have taken out their student loans one year more recently than did the members of the prior year's cohort. Consequently a larger and larger proportion of new law graduates will qualify each year for the more advantageous PAYE Plan enrollment, with PAYE Plan enrollment eventually almost completely displacing old IBR plan enrollment as the PAYE Plan eligibility cut-off date gradually recedes into the distant past. So one would expect that the relative proportion of PAYE Plan enrollees among those law graduate Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness decades later will also likely steadily increase each year.

Starting in 2016 those law graduates who do not qualify for more advantageous PAYE Plan enrollment will now have the additional choice of enrolling in the REPAYE Plan rather than in the old IBR Plan. Which of these latter two Plans will be more to their advantage will depend on the potential enrollee's financial circumstances, specifically the expected presence or absence of significant spousal income over the repayment period.

Let me explain this point. Both the old IBR Plan and the REPAYE Plan will require 25 years of loan repayments by law graduate enrollees. However, the REPAYE Plan has the advantage over the old IBR Plan in that it will require that the enrollee make repayments of only 10% of their discretionary income, while the old IBR Plan will require larger repayments of 15% of discretionary income. In addition, the REPAYE Plan will forgive one-half of any unpaid accrued interest during periods of negative amortization, while the old IBR Plan will not. On the other hand, under the REPAYE Plan a married enrollee will have to include any spousal income in determining their size of his discretionary income, which can increase those required repayments substantially, whereas an old IBR enrollee will not have to do this if they file a separate tax return.

If a prospective enrollee has a spouse whose future income is expected to increase the family's discretionary income by less than 50% each year, on average,

the REPAYE Plan will require on average smaller monthly repayments than will the old IBR Plan. But if the expected spousal income will increase the family's discretionary income by more than 50% each year on average, however, the old IBR Plan will on average prove more advantageous, assuming that the enrollee files a separate tax return.<sup>54</sup> As a rough rule of thumb, if the spouse's expected annual adjusted gross income will average more than about 25% of the enrollee's adjusted gross income over the entire required repayment period this will increase the REPAYE Plan repayment requirements sufficiently that the old IBR Plan will prove more advantageous to the enrollee.<sup>55</sup> As a result many if not most potential Plan law graduate enrollees that are not eligible for the PAYE Plan in 2016 or later will choose the old IBR Plan over the new REPAYE Plan, although it is difficult to

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54 If an enrollee's spousal income increases the family's discretionary income by exactly 50%, then the REPAYE Plan's required repayments of 10% of that larger family discretionary income will be exactly equal in size to the required repayments made under the old IBR Plan's requirement of 15% of the amount of discretionary income based only on the enrollee's adjusted gross income.

55 As an illustration of this point, consider a Plan enrollee with a \$60,000/year adjusted gross income, and a family size of three persons. That person will have a discretionary income of approximately \$30,000/year, and will therefore under the new IBR Plan will have to make required monthly repayments of  $(\$30,000/12) \times .15 = \$375/\text{month}$ . Under the REPAYE Plan It would require a family discretionary income of \$45,000 year to have the same required monthly repayment obligation of \$375.  $(\$45,000/12) \times .10 = \$375$ . Therefore if the enrollee's spouse has an adjusted gross income of more than \$15,000/year -- more than 25% of the enrollee's \$60,000/year adjusted gross income -- the REPAYE Plan will be more costly than the old IBR Plan for that enrollee. I ignore in this calculation the possibility that an enrollee's family may bear some additional tax liability unrelated to Plan enrollment by having the enrollee and their spouse file separate tax returns rather than filing a single joint tax return.

predict what the relative enrollment proportions of these two enrollments are likely to be.

However, this difficult choice between old IBR Plan and REPAYE Plan enrollment will gradually become moot over time for a larger and larger proportion of potential Plan law graduate enrollees. As I have noted, both the old IBR Plan and the REPAYE Plan are less advantageous than the PAYE Plan for the steadily increasing proportion of law graduates who will qualify each year for PAYE Plan enrollment because the PAYE Plan's 20-year required repayment period is significantly shorter than the 25-year required repayment periods under both of those alternative Plans, and because its 10% of discretionary income repayment requirement is significantly less than the 15% required by the old IBR Plan, and because PAYE Plan enrollees unlike REPAYE Plan enrollees need not take into account spousal income in determining their repayment amounts if they file separate tax returns. As a larger and larger proportion of law graduates become eligible for PAYE Plan enrollment as the years go by the relative merits of the old IBR and REPAYE Plans as compared to one another will become irrelevant to more and more law graduates who will instead enroll in the PAYE Plan, and the number of old IBR Plan and REPAYE Plan enrollments each will likely gradually dwindle to insignificance.

Starting in 2017 increasing numbers of law graduates each year will be eligible for enrollment in the new IBR Plan. That Plan has the advantages of a low 10% of discretionary income repayment requirement and a short 20-year required repayment period. However, all persons eligible for new IBR Plan enrollment will also be eligible for PAYE Plan enrollment, and the required repayments and repayment period under the new IBR Plan are identical to those of the PAYE Plan. So whether a law graduate enrolls in the PAYE Plan or instead in the new IBR Plan will have no effect on the size or timing of their later debt forgiveness and consequent tax liability. I will therefore combine these two groups of Plan enrollees together for the purposes of my tax liability assessment and will not attempt to separately analyze the tax liability of enrollees in these latter two Plans.

In summary, from 2012 on each year a larger and larger proportion of law graduates will meet the eligibility requirements for PAYE Plan enrollment (or new IBR Plan enrollment after 2017). So from 2032 onwards the proportion of Plan law graduate enrollees who elected to enroll in the old IBR Plan and then later qualify for debt forgiveness, and who have been subject to 15% of income repayment requirements over their required 25-year repayment period, will gradually decrease to an insignificant figure. The Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness each year from 2032 onwards will increasingly be PAYE Plan

enrollees rather than old IBR Plan enrollees. And from 2041 on the number of REPAYE Plan law graduate enrollees who have enrolled starting in 2016, and who 25 years later will qualify for debt forgiveness, will also shrink over time to a very small figure as potential REPAYE Plan enrollees increasingly qualify for more advantageous PAYE Plan enrollment. Eventually virtually all Plan enrollees that qualify for debt forgiveness will be PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees that are subject to only 10% of discretionary income repayment requirements and 20-year repayment periods, and who as I will later demonstrate are consequently likely to have substantial amounts of unpaid debt forgiven.

Now exactly how rapidly the relative proportions of old IBR Plan enrollees and PAYE Plan enrollees who qualify for debt forgiveness starting in 2032 will shift towards PAYE enrollee dominance as the PAYE Plan's post- October 1, 2007 new borrower requirement becomes less constraining over time, and what proportion of that shrinking group of potential law graduate Plan enrollees who are not eligible for PAYE Plan enrollment will chose to enroll from 2016 onwards in the REPAYE Plan rather than the old IBR Plan, are difficult questions. There is, however, some aggregate DOE data available regarding the numbers of enrollees in the IBR and PAYE Plans from the third quarter of 2013 through the second

quarter of 2015,<sup>56</sup> and this data confirms the existence of the trend in relative Plan enrollments in favor of increased PAYE Plan enrollment that I have discussed above.

Between the start of the third quarter and the start of the fourth quarter of 2013 the number of persons enrolled in the old IBR Plan increased by 130,000, while the number of enrollees in the then newly-established PAYE Plan increased by only 20,000 persons.<sup>57</sup> Therefore over that three-month time period approximately 87% of new Plan enrollees enrolled in the old IBR Plan and only 13% in the PAYE Plan.<sup>58</sup> One year later, between the start of the third quarter third and the start of the fourth quarter of 2014, the number of old IBR Plan enrollees increased by 200,000 while the number of PAYE Plan enrollees increased by 60,000,<sup>59</sup> so that over that three-month time period only 77% of the new Plan enrollees were old IBR Plan enrollees, and the proportion of PAYE Plan enrollees had increased to 23%.<sup>60</sup> And only 6 months later, between the start of the

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56 “Direct Loan Portfolio by Repayment Type,” Department of Education, National Student Loan Data System (2015). These DOE statistics are aggregate figures for all Plan enrollees and do not separate out law graduate enrollees from other enrollees. They do, however, suggest a trend of a relative increase in the proportion of PAYE Plan enrollments, based on increasingly broad PAYE Plan eligibility, that is likely to hold for law graduate enrollees as well as for other enrollees.

57 *Id.*

58  $130,000/(130,000 + 20,000) = .867$ .  $20,000/(130,000 + 20,000) = .133$ .

59 *See supra* n. 56.

60  $200,000/(200,000 + 60,000) = .769$ .  $60,000/(200,000 + 60,000) = .231$ .

first quarter and the start of the second quarter of 2015, the number of IBR Plan enrollees had grown by 260,000 while the number of PAYE Plan enrollees had grown by 120,000,<sup>61</sup> so that the proportion of old IBR Plan enrollees among all new enrollees had declined to 68% with 32% of the new enrollees now being PAYE Plan enrollees.<sup>62</sup> This accelerating growth in the relative proportion of Plan enrollees that elect to enroll in the PAYE Plan is consistent with my earlier analysis.

Based on the 10% increase (from 13% to 23%) in the proportion of Plan enrollees who were PAYE Plan enrollees over the year between mid-2013 and mid-2014, and on the additional 9% increase in the proportion of PAYE enrollees in only the following six months after that (from 23% to 32%), I will in my later illustrative calculations assume that the proportion of PAYE Plan enrollees among all Plan law graduate enrollees will continue to grow after 2015 by an additional 10% each succeeding year, until by 2022 essentially all of the new Plan enrollees will choose the PAYE Plan.<sup>63</sup> I will therefore apply in my later illustrative

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61 *See supra* n. 56.

62  $260,000/(260,000 + 120,000) = .684$ .  $120,000/(260,000 + 120,000) = .316$ .

63 Given the recent acceleration in the relative rate of growth of PAYE Plan enrollment as compared to IBR Plan enrollment in the first half of 2015 I regard this as a rather conservative projection as to the strength of the trend in Plan law graduate enrollment favoring utilization of the PAYE Plan.

calculations the following assumptions regarding the relative proportions of law graduate enrollees in the various Plans from 2007 onwards:

2007 – 2011: 100% old IBR Plan enrollees, 0% PAYE Plan enrollees (the PAYE Plan did not exist prior to 1012)

2012 (estimated from 2013 DOE information): 87% old IBR Plan enrollees, 13% PAYE Plan enrollees

2013: 87% old IBR Plan enrollees, 13% PAYE Plan enrollees

2014: 77% old IBR Plan enrollees, 23% PAYE Plan enrollees

2015: 68% old IBR Plan enrollees, 32% PAYE Plan enrollees

2016 (projected): 58% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 42% PAYE Plan enrollees

2017 (projected): 48% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 52% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees

2018(projected): 38% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 62% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees

2019 (projected): 28% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 72% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees

2020 (projected): 18% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 82% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees

2021: 8% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 92% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees

2022 and thereafter: 0% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees, 100% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees

The law graduates enrolling in the old IBR or REPAYE Plans will have a 25-year required repayment period before qualifying for debt forgiveness, while the PAYE Plan and new IBR Plan enrollees will have only a 20-year required

repayment period. These different repayment period lengths complicate projecting the proportions of enrollees in each of the various Plans qualifying for debt forgiveness each year in 2032 onwards from the above initial Plan enrollment projections. When this complication is taken into account, which will lead to somewhat greater proportions of those Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness each year being PAYE Plan enrollees than otherwise would be the case, the enrollment estimates above lead to the following estimates for the relative proportions of enrollees in the various Plans who will qualify for debt forgiveness in 2032 and following years, which I will apply in my later illustrative calculations of aggregate law graduate debt forgiveness tax obligations:

2032: 95% old IBR Plan enrollees (2007 enrollees), 5% PAYE Plan enrollees (2012 enrollees)

2033: 85% old IBR Plan enrollees (2008 enrollees), 15% PAYE Plan enrollees (2013 enrollees)

2034: 75% old IBR Plan enrollees (2009 enrollees), 25% PAYE Plan enrollees (2014 enrollees)

2035: 65% old IBR Plan enrollees (2010 enrollees), 35% PAYE Plan enrollees (2015 enrollees)

2036: 55% old IBR Plan enrollees (2011 enrollees), 45% PAYE Plan enrollees (2016 enrollees)

2037: 45% old IBR Plan enrollees (2012 enrollees), 55% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees (2017 enrollees)

2038: 35% old IBR Plan enrollees (2013 enrollees), 65% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees (2018 enrollees)

2039: 25% old IBR Plan enrollees (2014 enrollees), 75% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees (2019 enrollees)

2040: 15% old IBR Plan enrollees (2015 enrollees), 85% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees (2020 enrollees)

2041 and thereafter: 5% old IBR Plan (or REPAYE Plan) enrollees (2016 enrollees), 95% PAYE Plan (or new IBR Plan) enrollees (2021 and later enrollees)

C. The Average Debt Forgiveness Tax Obligation That Will be Imposed on Individual old IBR and PAYE Plan Law Graduate Enrollees.

The next step in determining the overall size of the tax bomb's impact on law graduates is to estimate how large the individual tax liabilities are likely to be for enrollees in the various Plans when their remaining debts are later forgiven. As I have discussed in Part IV.B. above Plan law graduate enrollments are likely to be dominated by old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan enrollments, with the PAYE Plan increasingly over time becoming the preferred Plan choice. I will therefore attempt to estimate the size of these tax liabilities only for enrollees in those two Plans.

The most important factors in determining the amount of debt forgiveness tax liability for a particular individual IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollee who will eventually qualify for debt forgiveness will be the following:

1) how large is their loan debt at the time of their initial IBR or PAYE Plan enrollment,

- 2) what loan interest rates were in force when they took out each of their student loans,
- 3) what will be the size of their adjusted gross income in each of the next 20 or 25 years after enrollment during which they will be required to make repayments,
- 4) how large their family size will be each year during their repayment period,
- 5) the marginal federal income tax rate that will be applicable to their debt forgiveness income, based on the amount of their other taxable income and upon the tax rates then applicable for their filing status during the year of debt discharge, and
- 6) the state income tax treatment that will be given to their forgiven debt in the year of debt discharge by their particular state of residence.

Given the lack of disaggregated individual borrower data for IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees, and the obvious impossibility of meaningfully projecting the future annual income levels or family size or state of residence for specific individual borrowers, it is feasible only to attempt to estimate an overall average tax liability across the population of old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees. This average tax liability per law graduate Plan enrollee in a particular year can be roughly calculated combining estimates made for each of the following

determinative factors, based upon the earlier list of factors determining the tax liability for particular individual enrollees:

- 1) the average debt load at the time of enrollment for all IBR or PAYE law graduate enrollees,
- 2) the average loan interest rates across all of these enrollees and their loans,
- 3) the average annual salary profile over the time period between enrollment and debt forgiveness for this group of enrollees,
- 4) the average family size profile for those enrollees over that time period, and
- 5) the average marginal combined federal and state tax rate that will apply at the time of debt forgiveness to the forgiven debt for those enrollees.

Each of these averages will be difficult to precisely estimate with any real confidence, and moreover the calculation of an overall average tax liability per IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollee will multiplicatively compound the uncertainty inherent in each of these estimates. In order to advance the ball here I will offer some illustrative calculations regarding the size of the combined federal and state tax bill on this forgiven debt for hypothetical “average” IBR and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees, with these calculations based upon hopefully realistic simplifying assumptions with regard to each of the many above-noted factors. These calculations can of course later be revised to be more accurate as better

information becomes available. I will try to make very clear the specific assumptions that I will be making so that my methodology is transparent and such updating is facilitated.

There is fortunately some useful though incomplete statistical information available on the size of the average debt loads and future salary prospects of law graduates. Let me start by making some simplifying assumptions based on that information that will make these illustrative calculations more tractable. First of all, I will use 2014 as the year of Plan enrollment for these illustrative calculations. I will then assume that the law graduates who enrolled in the IBR or PAYE Plans in 2014 had an average total graduate and undergraduate student loan debt combined of \$160,000 at the time they enrolled in the old IBR or PAYE Plan,<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Let me explain the basis for this assumption of \$160,000 average debt loads for 2014 IBR or PAYE law graduate enrollees. The average level of undergraduate debt incurred by persons who borrow to partially finance their undergraduate studies is approximately \$30,000. Jeff Appel (Deputy Under Secretary, Department of Education), “Opening Remarks,” Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Extension Negotiated Rulemaking Committee Meetings (Feb. 24, 2015). I will assume that law graduates who have borrowed to finance their law studies have on average also borrowed this \$30,000 amount to finance their undergraduate studies. As for law school loans, the ABA has estimated the average amount borrowed by law students who took out loans to finance their 2012-2013 law school studies was \$32,289 for those attending public law schools, and \$44,094 for those attending private law schools. [ABA data cite] A simple, unweighted average of these public and private school amounts is \$38,192 (This is actually a very conservative loan amount estimate because enrollments in private law schools in 2014-15 significantly exceeded enrollments in public law schools by a ratio of 76,282 to 41,802, Report of the ABA Task Force on the Financing of Legal Education (June 17, 2015), at 16). Multiplying this one-year average 2012-2013 law school loan amount estimate by three for the three years of law school from 2011-2012 through 2013-2014 gives an overall sum of \$114,576.

Now if these \$114,576 of law school loans are taken out on a regularly spaced basis

and that they will remain enrolled until they qualify for debt forgiveness, and that they have an average family size of three persons throughout their required debt repayment period.<sup>65</sup> I will also assume that the amount of federal student loan debt borne by those enrollees enrolling in 2015 or thereafter will increase by about 3%/year annually to reflect annual tuition and cost of living increases.<sup>66</sup>

Estimating the average adjusted gross income of IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees over their debt repayment period is difficult but not impossible. First of all, recent National Association for Law Career Professionals (“NALP”) statistics indicate that approximately two-thirds of the graduating law school class of 2013 by nine months after their graduation had obtained full-time legal (or non-

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during the three years of law school then approximately an average of two years will elapse between the taking out of a loan and the borrower’s later enrollment in the IBR or PAYE Plan, typically six months after law school graduation. At an assumed loan interest rate of approximately 6.44%/year, *see infra* n. 78, which accrues during law school and is added to the debt to be repaid even though the debt repayment obligations do not begin until six months after graduation, this will add another approximately  $\$114,576 \times 0.1288 = \$14,757$  to the average borrower’s debt (I will not here consider the possible minor additional impact of accrued pre-repayment interest on the undergraduate loans of a later law graduate). Adding up these three debt balances ( $\$30,000 + \$114,576 + \$14,757$ ) yields a total average law graduate debt at the time of IBR or PAYE enrollment in 2014 of \$159,333. For the sake of analytical convenience I will round this figure up slightly to \$160,000.

65 Given that some law graduates never marry, while others do marry and sometimes have one or more children, in the absence of more detailed information it appears reasonable to me to assume an average family size for law graduates over the 20 to 25 years following their IBR or PAYE enrollment of three persons: the enrollee, their spouse and one child.

66 This 3% annual increase in the loan debts of post-2014 law graduate enrollees is conservative but relatively realistic assumption, given recent comparable annual increases of this general magnitude or more in the law school tuition and living costs that these loans are taken out to cover, and this assumption will facilitate calculating the amount of debt forgiven by different cohorts of Plan enrollees as they later start their careers at higher average starting salaries and then later reach their debt forgiveness eligibility dates.

legal) positions lasting a year or more, and these positions paid an adjusted mean gross annual salary<sup>67</sup> of \$78,205. But there are no available statistics that provide a mean gross annual starting salary for the remaining one-third of the 2013 graduating law school class who were by nine months after their graduation able to obtain only part-time legal (or non-legal) positions, or who remained unemployed at that time. Moreover, many of those unemployed persons or persons in part-time positions will have low incomes only temporarily and will eventually obtain better compensated full-time legal (or non-legal positions).

In the absence of better data I will assume for this illustrative analysis that two-thirds of each year's IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees will earn starting salaries averaging the same as the NALP's \$78,205 annual salary for two-thirds of 2013 graduates, with that figure then adjusted upwards by 3% to reflect annual overall price and salary inflation for each graduating class in 2014 and thereafter. I will also assume that the remaining one-third of each year's each IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees will by the time of their enrollment have taken positions that on average pay starting salaries equal only to the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2013 estimate of the average starting salary earned by

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<sup>67</sup> [NALP cite]. The mean salary determined by NALP from its survey was adjusted downwards to correct for estimation errors stemming from differential response rates to their survey among groups of persons with different income levels, with generally higher response rates for those persons with larger incomes. [NALP cite]

persons with only undergraduate degrees of \$44,928/year, again with that figure then also adjusted upwards by 3% to reflect my assumption as to annual overall price and salary inflation for each graduating class in 2014 and thereafter.<sup>68</sup> This will lead to an overall estimated starting salary for 2014 IBR or PAYE law graduate enrollees of  $((\$78,205 \times .67) + (\$44,928 \times .33)) \times 1.03 = \$69,057$ , with this estimated figure then increased by another 3% each year from 2015 onwards for later Plan enrollees to reflect annual starting salary inflation.<sup>69</sup>

Having estimated the salary of these law graduate enrollees at the time of their 2014 IBR or PAYE Plan enrollment I will then assume for the purposes of my analysis that all of these enrollees will remain enrolled and will be steadily employed after their enrollment until they qualify for debt forgiveness, and that they will receive annual raises averaging 5% each year over this period, in a

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68 [cite NACE statistics]

69 Here are the starting salaries calculated in the manner discussed in the main text that I will utilize for IBR or PAYE required repayment calculations for law graduates from 2014 on for the following decade, increasing by 3% each year from the prior year's level: 2014 - \$69,057; 2015 - \$71,129; 2016 - \$73,263; 2017 - \$75,461; 2018 - \$77,725; 2019 - \$80,056; 2020 - \$82,458; 2021 - \$84,932; 2022 - \$87,480; 2023 - \$90,104.

Given the limitations of the data that I am relying upon in making these average IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollee starting salary projections I will not attempt to adjust these figures downwards to reflect the fact that law graduates with lower-than-average starting salaries are likely to enroll in IBR or PAYE Plans at somewhat higher rates than are law graduates with high-than-average starting salaries. Nor will I attempt to estimate how much less the average adjusted gross income of Plan enrollees – which is the income amount that will be used for determining their monthly IBR or PAYE Plan repayment obligations -- will be than their gross salary income, although it will surely be somewhat less than this amount for many enrollees due to 401(k) or 403(b) retirement plan contributions and other exclusions from their gross incomes, thus reducing to some extent the size of their required repayment obligations.

macroeconomic environment with a 3% average annual rate of price inflation and consequent 3% annual increases in the poverty level income threshold used for determining the size of their repayment obligations. This is equivalent to assuming that law graduates will have their “real” incomes increase by 2%/year after their Plan enrollment until they later qualify for debt forgiveness. I believe that this is a conservative but realistic salary growth assumption for new law graduates for the coming two decades, given several structural changes in the legal profession in recent years which have together led to a significant and chronic shortage of well-paid entry-level attorney positions relative to the number of law graduates. This 2% annual real income growth assumption is a particularly important assumption for my analysis, since the rate of growth in a Plan enrollee’s real income will determine the rate of growth of their discretionary income, which in turn will determine the rate of growth of their debt repayments and in the eventual size of their remaining unpaid debt at the time of debt forgiveness.

Some other knowledgeable commentators are more optimistic than I am about the probable future salary trends for lawyers.<sup>70</sup> I will therefore, after

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70 Different analysts of law school affordability make different assumptions about future salary trends for lawyers and the future rates of overall price inflation. Herwig Schlunk, for example, assumed in his 2012 analysis that lawyer salaries would grow by 3.5%/year over the relevant future time period, and did not allow for any possible future price inflation, therefore implicitly assuming a relatively high real rate of growth of lawyer salaries of 3.5%. Herwig Schlunk, “Mamas 2011: Is a Law Degree a Good Investment Today?,” 36 J. Legal Prof. 310

calculating my estimates of future individual and aggregate debt forgiveness tax liabilities for Plan enrollees, also calculate how much those tax liability estimates would be reduced if one were to assume that there will be somewhat more rapid average annual rates of growth of 3% or even 4% in the real income of law graduate Plan enrollees after their enrollment.

Let me now turn to the calculation of the average annual interest rate on the outstanding debt for 2014 old IBR or PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees. An estimated \$30,000 of the average enrollee debt of \$160,000 is undergraduate debt.<sup>71</sup> The annual interest rate on federal undergraduate loans in 2012 and 2013 was a fixed 3.4%, but in mid-2013 that interest rate was changed to a new fixed rate for the duration of the loan that is annually reset for new Stafford loans in a manner that is indexed to be 2.05% above the interest rate on 10-year Treasury bonds on July 1 of each year.<sup>72</sup> As of July 1, 2013 that rate was set at 3.86%,<sup>73</sup> and as of July 1, 2014 it was reset at 4.66%,<sup>74</sup> and will be annually reset again on July 1 in each following year. I will utilize for these illustrative calculations a blanket

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(2012). Michael Simkovic & Frank McIntyre in their more recent work take the position that even Schlunk's 3.5% estimate of annual real salary growth rates for typical lawyers is too low. Michael Simkovic & Frank McIntyre, "The Economic Value of a Law Degree," SSRN (Apr. 13, 2013), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2250585>, at 17 ("Schlunk's analysis assumes an unrealistically low 3.5% real growth rate of earnings for law degree holders as they gain experience.")

71 *See supra* n. 64.

72 20 U.S.C. Section 1087e(b)(8)(A).

73 [cite]

74 [cite]

annual interest rate of 4.00% for these undergraduate debts of IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees that approximately reflects the average interest rate over time for undergraduate loans.

For the remaining \$130,000 of average law graduate enrollee debts that were incurred during law school the average annual interest rate charged prior to mid-2013 was about 7.5%, based on a mixture of Stafford Loans with 6.8% annual interest rates and Grad PLUS loans with much higher 7.9% annual interest rates.<sup>75</sup> Since that date, however, the interest rate charged graduate and professional students on new Stafford loans has also been annually indexed to be 3.6% above the interest rate on 10-year Treasury bonds, and the rate has been set at 4.6% above the 10-year Treasury bond rate for new Grad PLUS loans, both being significantly higher premiums above 10-year Treasury bond rates than are charged for undergraduate loans.<sup>76</sup> As of July 1, 2014 these loan rates were set at 6.21% for the Stafford Loans and 7.21% for the Grad PLUS loans.<sup>77</sup> I will for these illustrative calculations utilize a blanket annual interest rate of 7.00% for the law school debts

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75 See Crespi (2014), *supra* n. 273, at 68 n. 47.

76 Pub. L. No. 113-28, 127 Stat. 506-7, Section 2(a)(3).

77 [cite] As of July 1, 2015 these two interest rates will each be reset down 0.37% to 5.84% and 6.84%, respectively. [cite]

of IBR and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees that approximately reflects the average interest rate over time for law school loans.<sup>78</sup>

The overall “blended” loan interest rate that I will utilize for an “average” INR or PAYE enrollee with \$30,000 of undergraduate debt and \$130,000 of law school debt will therefore be 6.44%.<sup>79</sup> As I will later illustrate after completing my illustrative tax liability calculations for hypothetical average PAYE and old IBR Plan enrollees, these calculations are somewhat surprisingly only moderately sensitive to the interest rate charged borrowers.

As I will later demonstrate, the amount of debt that is forgiven will under the current Code tax schedules tend to put the Plan enrollees taxpayers into a relatively high marginal tax bracket, sometimes with some or all of that forgiven debt to be taxed at the 39.6% top marginal tax rate. Some states also impose relatively high top-bracket state income taxes on such income. I will for these calculations assume that a 30% federal marginal income tax rate and a 3.33% average marginal

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78 For these illustrative calculations I will ignore the possibility that a law graduate has financed a portion of his law school expenses with a federal Perkins Loan, which carries an interest rate of 5%. [cite] Some law graduates may have done so up to the allowable Perkins Loan maximum of \$8,000/year [cite], thus lowering their overall average loan interest rate possibly to as low as 6.14% if they have incurred \$24,000 of Perkins Loans. My later illustrative calculations of average Plan enrollee tax liability are surprisingly robust with regard to relatively small differences in loan interest rates, *see supra* n. 96, 108.

79  $((\$30,000 \times .04) + (\$130,000 \times .07)) / \$160,000 = \$10,300 / \$160,000 = 6.44\%$ .

state income tax rate will each apply to this forgiven debt income for each of these two hypothetical enrollees, for an overall tax rate of 33.3%<sup>80</sup>

These several assumptions when mathematically combined will lead to my hypothetical “average” 2014 old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees initially each making monthly payments under their Plan that are not sufficient to even cover the interest accruing on their assumed initial \$160,000 debt.<sup>81</sup> There will initially be negative amortization of their loan debts and they will grow rather than shrink over time. However, after some years of compounding 5% annual salary increases these hypothetical enrollees’ monthly repayments will eventually become large enough to cover all of the accruing loan interest and to begin to pay down the accumulated unpaid interest and some of loan principal debt. But both the old IBR Plan enrollee and the PAYE Plan enrollee will each have a significant amount of unpaid debt forgiven when they qualify for debt forgiveness, leading to significant tax liability, with the amounts of debt forgiven and taxes owed by the PAYE Plan enrollee being substantially larger than the comparable amounts for the old IBR enrollee.

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80 See Crespi (2104), *supra* n. 27, at 88-91.

81 The annual interest accruing on a \$160,000 loan debt at an assumed overall annual interest rate of 6.44% is \$10,300, or approximately \$858/month. This is well in excess of the \$332 monthly repayments that an “average” 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee with a family of three persons will be required to make. See *infra* n. 82.

To illustrate this point (in perhaps excruciating mathematical detail) let me present illustrative calculations of the eventual debt forgiveness tax liabilities under my assumptions for each of these two hypothetical “average” 2014 law graduate Plan enrollees, one enrolling in the old IBR Plan and the other in the PAYE Plan. As I have noted each of these enrollees will be assumed to remain enrolled in their Plan and be regularly employed throughout the applicable 20- or 25-year year repayment period, and each will be assumed to have a spouse and one dependent child, for a family of three persons

Let me first consider the circumstances of the hypothetical “average” law graduate enrolling in 2014 in the PAYE Plan. That enrollee under my starting salary assumptions noted above will have a 2014 annual starting salary of \$69,057. For analytical convenience I will conservatively assume that this enrollee had no significant applicable deductions from gross income so that their adjusted gross income was the same amount of \$69,057. 150% of the poverty level income for a family of 3 persons in 2014 was \$29,295.<sup>82</sup> The monthly repayment obligations of this enrollee under the PAYE Plan will be 10% of the difference between the enrollee’s adjusted gross income and 150% of the applicable poverty level income, and will therefore start at only \$332/month.<sup>83</sup> With the assumed \$30,000 of

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<sup>82</sup> Federal Poverty Guidelines for 2014 [cite]

<sup>83</sup>  $(\$69,057 - \$29,295) \times 10\% \times 1/12 = \$332$ .

undergraduate debt of the enrollee's assumed total \$160,000 debt at the time of enrollment accruing interest at an assumed annual rate of 4%, and the remaining \$130,000 law school portion of the debt accruing interest at an assumed annual rate of 7%, for an overall blended interest rate of 6.44%,<sup>84</sup> this \$332 monthly payment will be far less than sufficient to cover the \$858 of monthly interest accruing on that debt,<sup>85</sup> leading to negative amortization of the debt for that first year.

However, under these 5% annual salary growth and 3% annual increase of the poverty level wage assumptions those initial \$332 monthly loan repayments will grow by approximately 6.5%/year in 2015 and thereafter as the enrollee's discretionary income increases at this rate.<sup>86</sup> This 6.5% annual growth in the size of the repayments will have rather dramatic compounding effects over time, with the monthly repayments growing to about \$1,098 by the time of debt forgiveness in 2034,<sup>87</sup> and averaging about \$585/month over the entire 20-year required repayment period<sup>88</sup> before the enrollee becomes eligible for debt forgiveness.

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84 *See supra* n. 78.

85  $((\$30,000 \times .04) + (\$130,000 \times .07)) = \$10,300$ .  $\$10,300/12 = \$858$ .

86  $((\$69,057 \times 1.05) - (\$29,295 \times 1.03))/(\$69,057 - \$29,295) = \$42,336/\$39,762 = 1.065$ , a 6.5% annual increase in discretionary income.

87  $\$332 \times (1.065)^{19} = \$1,098$ . These monthly repayments to be made in the 20th and final year of required repayments are well below the approximately \$1,811/month payments that would have to be made to repay a \$160,000 loan under standard 10-year repayment terms, so that this hypothetical average PAYE Plan enrollee will remain in a situation of "partial financial hardship" throughout his repayment period, therefore there will not be any capping of repayment amount or capitalization of interest consequences ever imposed on that enrollee.

88  $\$332 \times (1.065)^9 = \$585$ .

Under these assumptions it will not be until approximately the 17<sup>th</sup> year of debt repayment that this hypothetical enrollee's monthly repayments under the PAYE Plan will have grown large enough to more than cover the \$858/month of interest accruing on this \$160,000 debt.<sup>89</sup> Under the PAYE Plan rules the government will accrue against the enrollee (but not capitalize into interest-bearing principal) all of the unpaid interest during the period of negative amortization.<sup>90</sup> After 16 years of negative amortization repayments, before the repayments have become large enough to cover the interest accruing on these loans, this enrollee will still owe all of the initial \$160,000 debt, and now will also owe a total of approximately \$57,912 of accrued and unpaid interest.<sup>91</sup>

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89 For the 16th year of repayments,  $\$332 \times (1.065)^{15} = \$854$ , slightly less than \$858, but for the 17th year of repayments,  $\$332 \times (1.065)^{16} = \$909$ .

90 This is assuming that none of the \$30,000 assumed undergraduate loan debt for this enrollee was in the form of subsidized Direct Loans for which the government would pay the accrued unpaid interest for the first three years after Plan enrollment.

91 This unpaid interest will accrue against the enrollee approximately as follows: In year 1 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$6,316$ . In year 2 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065) \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$6,057$ . In year 3 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^2 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$5,781$ . In year 4 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^3 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$5,488$ . In year 5 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^4 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$5,175$ . In year 6 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^5 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$4,842$ . In year 7 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^6 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$4,487$ . In year 8 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^7 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$4,109$ . In year 9 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^8 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$3,706$ . In year 10 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^9 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$3,278$ . In year 11 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{10} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12)) =$

However, after four more years of monthly repayments continuing to grow in size at 6.5%/year, and now more than large enough to cover the \$858 monthly loan interest, approximately \$6,792 of that accrued and unpaid interest will have been repaid, leaving approximately \$51,120 of accrued and unpaid interest in 2034 when this enrollee now qualifies for debt forgiveness after 20 years of repayments.<sup>92</sup> The amount of the enrollee's forgiven debt at that time will therefore be the original \$160,000 of unpaid loan principal plus the remaining

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\$2,821. In year 12 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{11 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$2,035$ . In year 13 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{12 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$1,818$ . In year 14 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{13 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$1,266$ . In year 15 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{14 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$679$ . In year 16 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{15 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$54$ . The total of accrued and unpaid interest after 16 years of loan repayments will therefore be about \$57,912, which will be added to the original \$160,000 loan debt, but not capitalized into interest-earning principal.

By year 17, however, the monthly loan repayments payments will have grown to approximately  $\$332 \times (1.065)^{16} = \$909$ , now finally large enough to cover the monthly interest of \$858 accruing on the original \$160,000 debt and to also that year repay a small portion ( $\$51 \times 12 = \$612$ ) of the \$57,912 of accumulated unpaid accrued interest, leaving \$57,300 of that unpaid interest to be later repaid. In year 18 the amount of accrued unpaid interest that will be repaid after covering the interest on the \$160,000 debt will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{17 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$1,322$ , leaving \$55,978 of accrued interest to be repaid. In year 19 the amount of accrued unpaid interest that will be repaid after covering the interest on the debt will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{18 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) = \$2,077$ , leaving \$53,901 of accrued interest to be repaid. Finally, in year 20 this amount of repayment over and above the accruing debt interest will be approximately  $((\$332 \times (1.065)^{19 \times 12}) - (\$858 \times 12)) \times (.50) = \$2,881$ , leaving \$51,120 of accrued interest to be repaid.

A total of about \$6,792 of the previously accrued unpaid interest will therefore be repaid during these last four years of repayments. At the time of debt forgiveness in 2034 this enrollee will therefore still owe the original \$160,000 of loan principal, plus an approximate additional amount of accrued and unpaid interest of \$51,120, for a total forgiven debt of approximately \$211,120.

92 *Id.*

\$51,120 of accrued and unpaid interest, for a total of \$211,120.<sup>93</sup> At the assumed applicable combined federal and state income tax rate of 33.3% this enrollee will owe taxes on this discharged debt of slightly over \$70,000.<sup>94</sup>

The key conclusion here that has been reached rather laboriously can be very succinctly stated. A hypothetical 2014 PAYE Plan law graduate enrollee who has an average debt load at the time of enrollment of \$160,000, and who earns an average income for such a person thereafter and has an average family size, will have approximately \$211,000 of debt forgiven when they qualify for debt forgiveness in 2034, and will owe income taxes of about \$70,000 on this forgiven debt. These calculations are based upon several important underlying assumptions, most importantly my assumption of average annual salary growth for this average 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee after their enrollment of 5%, along with an assumption of a 3% annual rate of price inflation after Plan enrollment, together equivalent to an assumption of 2% annual growth in “real” income,<sup>95</sup> and also to a much more

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93  $\$160,000 + \$51,120 = \$211,120$ .

94  $\$211,120 \times .333 = \$70,373$ .

95 If one were instead to assume 6% average annual salary growth after Plan enrollment -- equivalent to an assumption of a larger 3% annual growth in real income -- then this enrollee's discretionary income would grow by 8.2%/year rather than the previously calculated 6.5%, *see supra* n. 85, and their average monthly payments over the 20-year repayment period would then average \$675 rather than the previously calculated \$585, *see supra* n. 87. Over 20 years this more rapid payment growth would lead to a total increased debt repayment of approximately  $(\$675 - \$585) \times 12 \times 20 = \$21,600$ , reducing the amount of unpaid debt at the time of debt forgiveness for this average enrollee from \$211,120, *see supra* n. 92, to approximately  $\$211,120 - \$21,600 = \$189,520$ , and the debt forgiveness tax liability from \$70,373, *see supra* n. 93, down to \$63,173,

modest extent upon my assumption of an overall 6.44% annual interest rate owed by the enrollee on their student loans.<sup>96</sup>

Let me now consider the somewhat different circumstances facing a hypothetical “average” 2014 old IBR Plan enrollee. That enrollee under my salary assumptions will again have a \$69,057 annual starting salary, but the monthly repayment obligations of this enrollee will now be 15% of the difference between the enrollee’s family adjusted gross income and 150% of the applicable poverty level income, rather than 10% as for the PAYE Plan enrollee, and therefore will

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an 11.2% reduction in that tax liability.

If one were instead to assume a very optimistic 7% annual salary growth -- equivalent to an assumption of a 4% annual growth in real income -- then this enrollee’s discretionary income would grow by 9.9%/year rather than the previously calculated 6.5%, *see supra* n. 85, and their average monthly payments over the 20-year repayment period would then average \$776 rather than the previously calculated \$585, *see supra*. 87. Over 20 years this more rapid payment growth would lead to a total increased debt repayment of approximately  $(\$776 - \$585) \times 12 \times 20 = \$45,840$ , reducing the amount of unpaid debt at the time of debt forgiveness for this average enrollee from \$211,120, *see supra* n. 92, to approximately  $\$211,120 - \$45,840 = \$165,280$ , and the debt forgiveness tax liability from \$70,373, *see supra* n. 93, down to \$55,093 a 21.7% reduction in that tax liability. The average 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee would therefore still bear substantial debt forgiveness tax liability even under these more optimistic assumptions about their average annual rate of real income growth after enrollment.

96 The annual interest rate owed by a PAYE Plan enrollee on their debt is somewhat surprisingly only a relatively minor factor in determining the size of their later debt forgiveness tax liability. For each 1% that the borrower’s average overall annual loan interest rate differs from my assumed 6.44% that borrower’s interest charge on their assumed \$160,000 loan balance over the 20-year PAYE Plan repayment period will differ only by  $\$160,000 \times .01 \times 20 = \$32,000$ . So, for example, if a PAYE Plan enrollee had an overall loan interest rate of 5.94% on their loans -- 0.5% below the assumed 6.44% annual rate used in my calculations -- then they would have approximately  $\$32,000 \times 0.5 = \$16,000$  less in unpaid accrued interest at the time of debt forgiveness than the approximately \$51,000 that the hypothetical average 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee would still owe, and therefore would owe approximately  $(\$211,000 - \$16,000) \times .333 = \$65,000$  in taxes, only about a 7.9% reduction in their tax liability from that of the hypothetical average PAYE Plan enrollee.

now be \$498/month<sup>97</sup> rather than only \$332/month. Even this larger \$498 monthly payment, however, will be insufficient to cover the \$858 of monthly interest accruing on this \$160,000 debt,<sup>98</sup> also leading to negative amortization of the debt for that first year. However, those initial \$498 monthly loan repayments under these 5% annual salary growth and 3% annual increase of the poverty level wage assumptions will again grow over time by approximately 6.5%/year in 2015 and thereafter.<sup>99</sup> This 6.5% annual growth in the size of the repayments will once again have significant compounding effects over time, particularly now that the required repayment period is 25 years rather than 20 years. Given the substantially larger initial monthly repayments these repayments will now grow to \$1,811/month by the time of debt discharge in 2039,<sup>100</sup> and will average about \$1,020/month over the 25-year required repayment period.<sup>101</sup> Unlike the situation of the hypothetical 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee these average monthly repayments over the repayment

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97  $(\$69,057 - \$29,295) \times 15\% \times 1/12 = \$498$ .

98  $(\$30,000 \times .04) + (\$130,000 \times .07) = \$10,300$ .  $\$10,300/12 = \$858$ .

99 *See supra* n. 85.

100 The initial monthly repayments of \$498/month would grow to \$2,257/month by the 25th year if it were not for the monthly payments cap of \$1,811 imposed on this hypothetical average old IBR enrollee, based on the monthly repayments imposed by a 10-year standard repayment schedule for a \$160,000 loan at a 6.44% interest rate.  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{24} = \$2,257$ . But by the 22nd year of repayments this cap will apply.  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{20} = \$1,755$ , while  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{21} = \$1,869$ .

101  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{12} = \$1,060$ . \$1,060 is therefore the average monthly payment for uncapped payments for the entire 25 years of repayments. But if one also takes into account that the payments for the last four years will be capped at \$1,811/month, this reduces the overall average monthly payment over the repayment period by about \$40/month down to about \$1,020/month.

period are now significantly larger than the \$858 monthly interest owed on the original \$160,000 debt.

Under these assumptions, the old IBR Plan enrollee will also initially be making payments that are too small to cover the loan interest payments, again leading to negative amortization. Under the old IBR Plan the government will again charge against the enrollee (but not capitalize into interest-bearing principal) all of the unpaid interest during the period of negative amortization.<sup>102</sup> But by approximately the tenth year of loan repayments under the old IBR Plan the 2014 enrollee's monthly payments will have grown large enough to now more than cover the \$858/month of interest accruing on this initial \$160,000 debt.<sup>103</sup> After 9 years of negative amortization repayments this average 2014 IBR Plan enrollee will therefore still owe all of the initial \$160,000 debt, but now will also owe a total of approximately \$22,586 of additional accrued and unpaid interest.<sup>104</sup>

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102 This is assuming that none of the \$30,000 assumed undergraduate loan debt for this enrollee was in the form of subsidized Direct Loans for which the government would pay the accrued unpaid interest for the first three years after Plan enrollment.

103 For the 9th year of repayments,  $\$498 \times (1.065)^8 = \$824$ , slightly less than \$858, but for the 10th year of repayments,  $\$498 \times (1.065)^9 = \$878$ .

104 This unpaid interest will accrue against the enrollee approximately as follows: In year 1 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$4,320$ . In year 2 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times 1.065 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$3,936$ . In year 3 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^2 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$3,522$ . In year 4 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^3 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$3,081$ . In year 5 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.059)^4 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$2,612$ . In year 6 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times$

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$(1.065)^5 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = 2,112$ . In year 7 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^6 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$1,580$ . In year 8 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^7 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$1,013$ . In year 9 this amount of accrued unpaid interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^8 \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$410$ . The total of accrued and unpaid interest after 9 years of loan repayments will therefore be about \$22,586, and this amount will be added to the original \$160,000 loan debt, but not capitalized into interest-earning principal.

By year 10, however, the monthly loan repayments payments will have grown to about  $\$498 \times (1.065)^9 = \$878$ , now finally large enough to cover the monthly interest of \$858 accruing on the original \$160,000 debt and to also repay a small portion ( $\$20 \times 12 = \$240$ ) of the \$22,586 of accumulated unpaid accrued interest, leaving \$22,346 to be later repaid. In year 11 the amount of accrued unpaid interest that will be repaid after covering the interest on the debt will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{10} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$918$ , leaving \$21,428 to be repaid. In year 12 the amount of accrued unpaid interest that will be repaid after covering the interest on the debt will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{11} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$1,647$ , leaving \$19,781 to be repaid. In year 13 this amount of overpayment over and above the debt interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{12} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$2,423$ , leaving \$17,358 to be repaid. In year 14 this amount of overpayment over and above the debt interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{13} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$3,251$ , leaving \$14,288 to be repaid. In year 15 this amount of overpayment over and above the debt interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{14} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$4,131$ , leaving \$13,227 to be repaid. In year 16 this amount of overpayment over and above the debt interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{15} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$5,069$ , leaving \$8,158 to be repaid. In year 17 this amount of overpayment over and above the debt interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{16} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$6,068$ , leaving only \$2,090 to be repaid. In year 18 this amount of overpayment over and above the debt interest will be approximately  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{17} \times 12) - (\$858 \times 12) = \$7,132$ , allowing for payment of the remaining \$2,090 of unpaid interest and the application of the remaining \$5,042 to finally begin repay some of the \$160,000 outstanding principal debt, reducing it in size to \$154,958.

Over the remaining seven years of loan repayments the outstanding debt will decline with increasing rapidity as the interest-bearing principal debt declines in the same manner as occurs in the amortization of a standard home mortgage loan. Let me detail this remainder of this process of debt reduction. In year 19 the repayments (now totaling  $(\$498 \times (1.065)^{18} \times 12) = \$18,565$ ) will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$146,368. In year 20 the repayments (now totaling  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{19} \times 12 = \$19,772$ ) will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$136,018. In year 21 the repayments (now totaling  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{20} \times 12 = \$21,057$ ) will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$123,717.

In year 22 the required repayments under the 15% of discretionary income formula will now total  $\$498 \times (1.065)^{21} \times 12 = \$22,426$ , which slightly exceeds the  $\$1,811 \times 12 = \$21,732$  loss of “partial financial hardship” payment cap of the monthly amount needed to repay the initial

After nine more years of making monthly repayments that grow steadily in size at a rate of 6.5%/year, and now more than large enough to cover the \$858 monthly loan interest, that \$22,586 of accrued and unpaid interest will be fully repaid.<sup>105</sup> The loan repayments over the final seven years of the 25-year repayment period will now begin to reduce both the size of the loan debt and the annual interest charges on that shrinking debt in a fashion that parallels the workings of a typical home mortgage amortization schedule, leaving only \$50,125 of unpaid debt at the time of debt forgiveness in 2039.<sup>106</sup> This second laboriously reached conclusion can also be succinctly stated. A hypothetical 2014 old IBR Plan law graduate enrollee who has an average debt load at the time of enrollment of \$160,000, and who thereafter earns an average income for such a person and has an average family size, will have approximately \$63,000 of debt forgiven when they qualify for debt forgiveness in 2039, and will owe income taxes of about \$21,000 on this forgiven debt. These calculations are again based upon several important underlying assumptions, most importantly my assumption of average

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\$160,000, 6.44% annual interest loan debt on standard 10-year terms, so that the latter sum of \$21,732 is all of the repayment that will be required of that enrollee in that year, which will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$109,949. In year 23 the repayments (now again totaling \$21,732 under the cap) will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$95,298. In year 24 the repayments (now again totaling \$21,732 under the cap) will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$79,703. And in year 25 the repayments (now again totaling \$21,732 under the cap) will be sufficient to reduce the outstanding loan principal to approximately \$63,104.

<sup>105</sup> *Id.*

<sup>106</sup> *Id.*

annual salary growth for this average 2014 old IBR Plan enrollee after their enrollment of 5%, along with an assumption of a 3% annual rate of price inflation after Plan enrollment, equivalent to an assumption of 2% annual growth in “real” income,<sup>107</sup> and also to a more modest extent upon my assumption of an overall 6.44% annual interest rate owed by the enrollee on their student loans.<sup>108</sup>

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107 If one were instead to assume 6% annual salary growth -- equivalent to an assumption of a larger 3% annual growth in real income -- then this enrollee’s discretionary income would grow by 8.2%/year rather than the previously calculated 6.5%, *see supra* n. 85, and their monthly payments over the 25-year repayment period would then average \$1,216 rather than the previously calculated \$1,020 for the 2% real income growth rate assumption, *see supra* n. 100. The monthly repayments would have averaged a substantially larger \$1,282/month over this repayment period if not for the imposition of the payment “cap” of \$1,811/month, *see supra* n. 99, which will take effect under these salary growth assumptions in the 18th year of repayments.

Over 25 years this more rapid payment growth and larger payments for the first 22 years (before the payments under either assumption were capped at \$1,811/month) would lead to a total increased debt repayment of approximately  $(\$1,216 - \$1,020) \times 12 \times 25 = \$58,200$ , sufficient to sharply reduce the \$63,104 of unpaid debt under the prior 2% real income growth assumptions, *see supra* n. 103, by 92.2% down to only to \$4,904 before this hypothetical average 2014 old IBR enrollee would qualify for debt forgiveness in 2039, thus reducing the debt forgiveness taxes for this particular hypothetical enrollee in that year to a small  $\$4,904 \times .333 = \$1,635$ . However, since the initial amount of debt owed at the time of enrollment and the income histories of different 2014 old IBR enrollees will each vary around these hypothetical average circumstances there will be some fraction of those enrollees, slightly over half of them if their financial circumstances follow the usual normal distribution, that would still owe some debt forgiveness taxes in 2039. But in most cases these would now be relatively small amounts of liability.

If one were instead to assume a very optimistic 7% annual salary growth – equivalent to an assumption of a 4% annual growth in real income -- then this hypothetical average 2014 old IBR Plan enrollee’s discretionary income would grow by 9.9%/year rather than the previously calculated 6.5%, *see supra* n. 81, and their average monthly payments over the 25-year repayment period would then average \$1,326 rather than the previously calculated \$1,060, *see supra* n.100. The monthly repayments would have averaged a substantially larger \$1,546/month over this repayment period if not for the imposition of the payment “cap” of \$1,811/month, *see supra* n. 99, which will take effect under these salary growth assumptions in only the 15th year

These extensive calculations above have been carried out only for hypothetical “average” 2014 PAYE Plan and old IBR Plan enrollees. There will of course be substantial variation in the amount of debt that law graduate enrollees will have at the time of their enrollment, and those law graduates that have larger-than-average debt loads will consequently bear larger-than-average tax liabilities at the time of debt forgiveness.

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of repayments. Over 25 years this more rapid payment growth and consequently larger payments for the first 22 years (before the payments under either assumption were capped at \$1,811/month) would lead to a total increased debt repayment of approximately  $(\$1,326 - \$1,020) \times 12 \times 25 = \$91,800$ , well in excess of the \$63,204 of unpaid debt remaining after 25 years of repayments under the 2% real income growth assumption, *see supra* n. 101, allowing the debt to be fully repaid before the end of the 25-year period. In other words, this more rapid payment growth under the assumption of 4% annual real income increases would surely be sufficient to discharge the debts of virtually all 2014 old IBR enrollees before or by the end of their 25-year required repayment period in 2039, so that under that assumption there would be virtually no tax liability imposed on any of these old IBR these enrollees.

The amount of debt forgiveness tax liability that old IBR enrollees are estimated to bear is thus shown to be quite sensitive to one’s initial assumptions regarding the average annual rate of real growth in enrollee incomes after their enrollment, much more sensitive than are the amounts of tax liability that hypothetical average PAYE Plan enrollees are estimated to bear to those assumptions, *see supra* n. 90.

108 The annual interest rate owed by an old IBR Plan enrollee on their debt can be a fairly significant factor in determining the size of their later debt forgiveness tax liability. For each 1% that the borrower’s average overall annual loan interest rate differs from my assumed 6.44% that borrower’s interest charge on their assumed \$160,000 loan balance over the 25-year old IBR Plan repayment period will differ by  $\$160,000 \times .01 \times 25 = \$40,000$ . So, for example, if an old IBR Plan enrollee had an overall loan interest rate of 5.94% on their loans -- 0.5% below the assumed 6.44% annual rate used in my calculations -- then they would have approximately  $\$40,000 \times 0.5 = \$20,000$  less in unpaid loan principal at the time of debt forgiveness than the \$63,000 of the hypothetical average 2014 old IBR Plan enrollee would owe, and therefore would owe approximately only  $(\$63,000 - \$20,000) \times .333 = \$14,333$  in taxes, about a 31.7% reduction in their tax liability from the approximately \$21,000 owed by the hypothetical average old IBR Plan enrollee.

For example, consider the circumstances of an otherwise average 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee who enrolls with a larger-than-average but not unimaginable initial \$200,000 debt, \$40,000 greater than that of the average enrollee. At the time of debt forgiveness that enrollee will then have an additional \$40,000 of unpaid principal plus an additional approximately \$64,000 of additional unpaid accrued interest,<sup>109</sup> for a total forgiven debt of \$315,000<sup>110</sup> and an approximate tax liability of \$105,000.<sup>111</sup> A comparable 2014 IBR enrollee with a \$200,000 initial debt load would have \$154,624<sup>112</sup> of debt forgiven and an approximate tax liability of \$51,500.<sup>113</sup> Enrollees with average debt loads but with below-average incomes after enrollment and/or larger-than-average family sizes would similarly have larger-than-average amounts of debt forgiven and tax liabilities imposed.

In brief summary of these extensive calculations, if one assumes that no old IBR or PAYE law graduate enrollees will be so foolish or so unfortunate as to be dropped from their Plan for failure to make the required repayments, or for failure to file the required annual income verifications, then a hypothetical average 2014 PAYE Plan law graduate enrollee with an initial loan debt of \$160,000 at the time of enrollment and an average annual income thereafter will have accumulated an

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109  $\$40,000 \times .0644 \times 25 = \$64,400$ .

110  $\$211,120 + \$40,000 + \$64,400 = \$315,520$ .

111  $\$315,520 \times .333 = \$105,173$ .

112  $\$63,104 + \$40,000 + (\$40,000 \times .0644) \times 20 = \$154,624$ .

113  $\$154,624 \times .333 = \$51,541$ .

unpaid debt of about \$210,000 at the time of debt discharge 20 years after enrollment, and will owe approximately \$70,000 in income taxes on this forgiven debt,<sup>114</sup> with those enrollees with larger-than-average debts and/or unfavorable later annual incomes after enrollment owing upwards of perhaps \$100,000 or even more. However, a hypothetical average 2014 new IBR Plan enrollee with the same debt and later annual income characteristics will have an unpaid debt of only about \$63,000 at the time of debt discharge and will owe only approximately \$21,000 in taxes on this forgiven debt, although again some old IBR Plan enrollees with unusually large initial debt loads and/or unfavorable later annual incomes could owe considerably more than this amount, perhaps even as much as \$50,000 or more. Some (but not all) of the substantial advantages of the PAYE Plan over the IBR Plan that is provided by the smaller required monthly repayments and the shorter required repayment period will therefore be offset by the larger (and also five years earlier) tax obligation imposed on PAYE Plan enrollees at the time of debt forgiveness.

Later post-2014 old IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees, while they will likely have somewhat larger loan debts at the time of their Plan enrollment as law school tuitions and living costs probably will continue to increase over time, under my

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114 *See supra* n. 92.

inflation-based 3% annual growth in starting salaries assumption<sup>115</sup> they will also be making comparably larger loan repayments each year during their 20 or 25 years of repayments than will the 2014 enrollees since they will start from a somewhat larger annual income base. These higher repayments each year for these post-2014 enrollees should approximately offset their larger initial debt and consequently larger interest payment burden, leading to roughly the same general debt forgiveness and tax liability results for “average” post-2014 old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan enrollees as I have reached for 2014 enrollees. Similarly, old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan enrollees from 2007 through 2013 had on average somewhat smaller debt loads at the time of their enrollment than did the 2014 enrollees, but they will also have somewhat lower salaries on average in each year after their enrollment than will the 2014 enrollees, leading to the same general results for those earlier Plan enrollees as I have obtained for 2014 enrollees.

Having estimated in Part IV.B of this article the relative proportions of Plan law graduate enrollees who will qualify for debt forgiveness in each of the different Plans in 2032 and thereafter, and having now estimated in this Part IV.C. the amount of debt forgiveness tax liability that will be borne by average enrollees in the old IBR and PAYE Plans that have and will in the future dominate Plan

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<sup>115</sup> Which is a relatively conservative assumption given that annual increases in starting salaries for attorneys may reflect productivity improvements as well as price inflation, and thus may exceed somewhat inflation rates.

enrollment, let me now turn to the difficult question of estimating how many Plan enrollees are likely to qualify for debt forgiveness each year in 2032 and thereafter so that the aggregate amount of tax liability imposed can then be estimated.

D. The Number of Lawyers Who Will Receive Debt Forgiveness Each Year Under One or Another of the Plans.

I have unfortunately been unable to locate any statistics that classify IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees by their academic degrees that would enable one to precisely identify the relative proportions of current IBR and PAYE Plan enrollees that are repaying law school loan debts (and often also undergraduate loans), as opposed to repaying other graduate or professional school loans or repaying only undergraduate loans. The DOE, however, has made available more aggregated summary statistics on a quarterly basis regarding the total number of enrollees in the IBR and PAYE Plans since early 2013,<sup>116</sup> and these statistics provide some basis for making inferences about law graduate Plan enrollments.<sup>117</sup>

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116 “Direct Loan Portfolio by Repayment Plan,” Department of Education, National Student Loan Data System (2015).

117 These DOE statistics aggregate together all IBR Plan and all PAYE Plan enrollees and unfortunately do not separate out law graduate enrollees. Nor do those statistics identify how many law graduate IBR and PAYE enrollees are also enrollees in the PSLF Plan who will receive debt forgiveness after 10 years of qualified public service employment without bearing any debt forgiveness tax liability. It is therefore difficult to determine from these statistics the

The earliest of these available DOE statistics show that a total of 950,000 persons were enrolled in either the old IBR Plan or the PAYE Plan as of the start of the third quarter of 2013.<sup>118</sup> At that time approximately 1.2% of undergraduate and graduate degrees conferred each year were three-year law degrees,<sup>119</sup> although with the decline in law school enrollments that has taken place in recent years and that will likely continue to some extent over the next few years this percentage will probably be closer to 1% in 2016 and thereafter.<sup>120</sup> One could attempt to estimate the number of law graduate Plan enrollees as of that date on this basis. However, the proportion of enrollees in the old IBR or PAYE Plans that are law graduates is

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current situation and to make predictions as to future trends in the rate of enrollment by law graduates in the IBR Plan or the PAYE Plan, but not also in the PSLF Plan, so as to be able to predict the number of law graduate Plan enrollees who will likely bear debt forgiveness tax liability 20 or 25 years later. In the absence of this data I will simply assume for these illustrative calculations that the proportion of IBR and PAYE law graduate enrollees who also enroll in the PSLF Plan, and will therefore not be subject to later tax liability, is small enough that I need not attempt to adjust my predictions to reflect this complication. To the extent that PSLF Plan enrollment among law graduates is or later becomes substantial then my predictions as to the rates of enrollment in the IBR Plans or PAYE Plans (but not also the PSLF Plan) may be correspondingly somewhat too large. The DOE may have more granular data available regarding the educational background and loan amount characteristics of law graduate and other borrowers at the time of their initial IBR or PAYE enrollment, and as to the annual numbers of PSLF Plan enrollees among law graduate Plan enrollees, but if so it has chosen not to make that data publicly available to outside commentators.

118 *Id.*

119 For 2011-12, the latest year for which statistics are available, there were a total of 3,732,875 Associate's degrees, Bachelor's Degrees, Master's Degrees and Doctorates awarded, [NCES cite] of which 44,495 were JD or LLB law degrees, approximately 1.2% of the total. [ABA cite].

120 As I will later discuss law school enrollments have declined since 2012 and the number of annual law school graduates will likely stabilize at about 35,000 to 36,000, roughly 1% of all degrees awarded each year. *See infra* at the text corresponding to n. 140-42.

for a couple of reasons likely to significantly exceed the overall rate of Plan enrollees among all degree holders.

First of all, a substantially higher proportion of law graduates than of persons earning undergraduate degrees have taken out federal student loans, and one would expect that this factor alone would lead to higher rates of enrollment in the Plans among law graduates than among holders of undergraduate degrees.<sup>121</sup> Second, and probably more importantly, the reduced monthly repayment benefits of Plan enrollment are much greater for high-debt law graduates than they are for other graduate and professional students, and especially for undergraduate students, who generally incur far smaller loan debts. One would expect these substantially larger benefits that can be obtained from Plan enrollment to also lead to significantly higher enrollment rates among law graduates than among other degree holders. My conjecture is that for these two reasons the proportion of Plan enrollees that are law graduates has always been and will continue to be at least 50% higher than the overall proportion of law graduates among all eligible borrowers. I will therefore assume for all of my later calculations that for the 2007-2015 time period 1.8% of

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<sup>121</sup> Approximately 85% of law graduates have outstanding federal student loans, [cite] while only about 70% of undergraduate borrowers have outstanding federal student loans, [cite] suggesting that due to this factor alone one would expect that the proportion of law graduates who became Plan enrollees would be  $(85\% - 70\%)/70\% = 21.4\%$  greater than the comparable proportion of undergraduate borrowers who enrolled in a Plan.

all Plan enrollees were or will be law graduates,<sup>122</sup> and that from 2016 on 1.5% of all Plan enrollees will be law graduates.<sup>123</sup> I regard these to be rather conservative estimates as to the proportion of Plan enrollees that are or will be law graduates.

Out of the 950,000 persons enrolled in the IBR or PAYE Plans as of mid-2013 (2007 through 2012 old IBR Plan enrollees or 2012 PAYE Plan enrollees) I therefore estimate on this basis that 17,100 were law graduates.<sup>124</sup> Assuming for analytical convenience that there were equal numbers of Plan law graduate enrollments each year between 2007 and 2012,<sup>125</sup> this would lead to an estimate of only 2,850 law graduates enrolling in a Plan during each of these six years.<sup>126</sup>

By mid-2014, however, the combined enrollment in the old IBR and PAYE Plans had more than doubled to 1,910,000, a substantial increase of 960,000 persons from mid-2013.<sup>127</sup> Those statistics show that there was rapid growth in IBR enrollments in 2013,<sup>128</sup> and extremely rapid growth in PAYE enrollments,<sup>129</sup> although there was no appreciable growth in participation in the earlier established

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122  $1.2\% \times 1.5 = 1.8\%$ .

123  $1\% \times 1.5 = 1.5\%$ .

124  $950,000 \times .012 \times 1.5 = 17,100$ .

125 In actual fact the number of law graduate enrollments were probably a bit lower than this number in each of the earlier years, and a bit higher in each of the later years, but I will ignore this minor complication in my calculations.

126 All of these enrollees from 2007 through 2011 would have been old IBR Plan enrollees, but starting in 2012 a certain proportion would instead be PAYE Plan enrollees.

127 *See supra* n. 56.

128 *Id.*

129 *Id.*

and less generous Income-Contingent Repayment Plan.<sup>130</sup> I therefore estimate that the number of new law graduate enrollees in 2013 among this large group of new Plan enrollees was 17,280,<sup>131</sup> a figure which is equal in size to 36.9% of that year's graduating law school class.<sup>132</sup>

By the beginning of the second quarter of 2015 the combined enrollment in the IBR and PAYE Plans had again grown sharply to 2,860,000 persons, an increase of another 950,000 persons.<sup>133</sup> There was again rapid growth in IBR enrollment<sup>134</sup> in 2014, and extremely rapid growth in PAYE enrollment,<sup>135</sup> although again there was no appreciable growth in Income-Contingent Repayment Plan enrollment.<sup>136</sup> I therefore estimate that the number of new law graduate enrollees in 2014 among this group of new Plan enrollees was 17,100,<sup>137</sup> a figure that was equal in size to 39% of that year's graduating law school class.<sup>138</sup>

On the basis of the above calculations that I have done for 2013 and 2014 enrollments in reliance upon the DOE statistics I will for the purposes of my later

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130 *Id.*

131  $960,000 \times .012 \times 1.5 = 17,280$

132 There were 46,776 law school graduates in 2013. [ABA stats]  $17,280/46,776 = .369$ .

133 *See supra* n. 56.

134 *Id.*

135 *Id.*

136 *Id.*

137  $950,000 \times 0.12 \times 1.5 = 17,100$ .

138 There were 43,882 law school graduates in 2014. [ABA stats]  $17,100/43,832 = .390$ .

illustrative calculations assume that in 2015 and thereafter the number of Plan law graduate enrollees each year will continue to be approximately equal to 40% of the number of students graduating from law school in that year, although it is quite possible that this assumption is too conservative in that the current Plan enrollment percentage among law graduates will further increase significantly as the reduced repayment and debt forgiveness benefits of Plan enrollment become increasingly widely appreciated, and as it becomes increasingly recognized that there is no potential downside risk at all to enrolling.<sup>139</sup> To the extent that the number of Plan enrollees each year diverges from being equal to 40% of the size of that year's graduating law school class the aggregate tax liability that will be imposed on those enrollees decades later will diverge from my estimates in the same direction and same proportions.<sup>140</sup> This 40% enrollment estimate is of course based upon the assumption no significant new legislative or regulatory restrictions will be imposed on law graduate eligibility for Plan enrollment, or that make less attractive

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139 “[T]here is little incentive not to enroll in IBR—the fact that it can be no worse than the 10-year [standard debt repayment] plan ensures that any well-informed graduate should enroll in IBR, even those who can afford to pay [the costs of school] out of pocket.” John R. Brooks, “Income-Based Repayment and the Public Financing of Higher Education,” 104 *Geo L. J.* \_\_\_, at \_\_\_ (2015).

140 So, for example, if the number of Plan enrollees each year turns out to be equal in size to 50% rather than 40% of that year's graduating law school class, a 25% increase in the number of enrollees over my estimate ( $50\%/40\% = 1.25$ , a 25% increase), the aggregate debt forgiveness tax liability later imposed upon those enrollees will also be approximately 25% larger than estimated.

for law graduates the repayment requirements or debt forgiveness provisions of the Plans.

The next step here in the analysis is to estimate the number of law school graduates in 2015 and thereafter to which this estimated 40% Plan enrollment figure can be applied to. There were 46,364 law graduates awarded degrees in 2012, 46,776 in 2013, and 43,832 in 2014.<sup>141</sup> The number of law graduates obtaining degrees in 2015 and in each year after that will obviously depend upon the number of entering first-year law students three years earlier, and upon student attrition rates during law school. The number of entering first-year law students peaked at 52,488 in 2010-2011, and has been rapidly declining ever since.<sup>142</sup> It is now down to 37,924 first-year students as of 2014-2015,<sup>143</sup> and this number is widely expected to decline further by at least a modest amount before it stabilizes. I will base my subsequent calculations on the assumption that the number of entering first-year law students each year will modestly fall further in 2015 and then stabilize by the fall of 2016 at about 35,000 students.

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141 “2014 Law Graduate Employment Data,” ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2014); “2013 Law Graduate Employment Data,” ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2013).

142 “Enrollment and Degrees Awarded 1963-2012 Academic Years,” ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2014).

143 “News Release” (Dec. 16, 2014), ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2014).

Historically, the number of law students receiving degrees in a given year is about 90% of the size of the entering cohort of first-year law students three years earlier.<sup>144</sup> I will therefore utilize in my subsequent calculations the following estimates regarding the number of new law graduates who will be potential enrollees for the IBR or PAYE Plans for each of the following years, starting in 2015:

2015: 40,033 law graduates<sup>145</sup>

2016: 35,707 law graduates<sup>146</sup>

2017: 34,132 law graduates<sup>147</sup>

2018: 32,400 law graduates<sup>148</sup>

2019 and thereafter: 31,500 law graduates<sup>149</sup>

Now applying my estimate that I have derived earlier from the DOE statistics that the number of Plan law graduate enrollees each year will be approximately equal to 40% of that year's law school graduating class for 2015 and thereafter,

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<sup>144</sup> See *supra* n. 139.

<sup>145</sup>  $44,481 \times .90 = 40,033$ . The 44,481 figure for 2012 first-year law students comes from "Enrollment and Degrees Awarded 1963-2012 Academic Years," ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2014).

<sup>146</sup>  $39,675 \times .90 = 35,707$ . The 39,675 figure for 2013 first year law students comes from "News Release" (Dec. 16, 2014), ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2014).

<sup>147</sup>  $37,924 \times .90 = 34,132$ . The 37,924 figure for 2013 first year law students comes from "News Release" (Dec. 16, 2014), ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (2014).

<sup>148</sup>  $36,000$  (estimated by me)  $\times .90 = 32,400$ .

<sup>149</sup>  $35,000$  (estimated by me)  $\times .90 = 31,500$ .

and using the estimates for Plan law graduate enrollment for 2007 through 2014 that I have derived earlier from those statistics, and using my projections for the size of graduating law school classes in 2015 and thereafter, this results in the following estimates of the number of Plan law graduate enrollees from 2007 onwards:

2007: 2,850 enrollees

2008: 2,850 enrollees

2009: 2,850 enrollees

2010: 2,850 enrollees

2011: 2,850 enrollees

2012: 2,850 enrollees

2013: 17,280 enrollees

2014: 17,100 enrollees

2015: 16,013 enrollees<sup>150</sup>

2016: 14,283 enrollees<sup>151</sup>

2017: 13,653 enrollees<sup>152</sup>

2018: 12,960 enrollees<sup>153</sup>

2019 and thereafter: 12,600 enrollees each year<sup>154</sup>

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150  $40,033 \times .40 = 16,013$ .

151  $35,707 \times .40 = 14,283$

152  $34,132 \times .40 = 13,653$ .

153  $32,400 \times .40 = 12,960$ .

154  $31,500 \times .40 = 12,600$ .

If my projections here are accurate regarding the numbers of law graduates who have enrolled in a Plan between 2007 and 2014, or who are likely to enroll in one Plan or another in 2015 or thereafter, this will mean that the tax bomb phenomena, which will start to impact a relatively small number of lawyers in 2032 when the earliest 2007 old IBR Plan and 2012 PAYE Plan enrollees begin to complete their required repayment periods, will become more significant in the mid- to late-2030's as each year larger and larger numbers of IBR and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees with substantial unpaid debt balances qualify for debt forgiveness, and as an increasing proportion of those qualifying Plan enrollees over time will be PAYE Plan enrollees with very large amounts of unpaid debt. This tax bomb question is therefore an important issue, but unfortunately one that has thus far been almost completely overlooked in the literature discussing the IBR and PAYE Plans.<sup>155</sup>

How many of these Plan law graduate enrollees will eventually qualify for debt forgiveness? The difficult problem of projecting the annual numbers of IBR and PAYE law graduate enrollees who will have their debts forgiven starting in 2032 is made even more challenging by recognition of the fact that surprisingly many

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155. *But see* Crespi (2014), *supra* n. 27, at 83-99 (including debt forgiveness tax liability in the analysis of loan repayment obligations of IBR and PAYE and PSLF Plan enrollees). *See also* Ron Lieber, "For Student Borrowers, Relief Now May Mean a Big Tax Bill Later," N.Y. Times (Dec. 14, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/your-money/for-student-borrowers-a-tax-time-bomb.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>; Jonathan A. LaPlante, "Congress's Tax Bomb: Income-Based Repayment and Disarming a Problem Facing Student Loan Borrowers," 100 *Corn. L. Rev.* 703 (2015).

persons who enroll in the IBR or PAYE Plans, and who benefit significantly from the reduced monthly repayments that are allowed by those Plans, are later dropped from the Plans as a result of failing to file the required annual income verifications that are necessary for loan servicers to determine their monthly repayment obligations, and then fail to promptly take the steps necessary for reinstatement.<sup>156</sup> In addition, a substantial number of other IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees are dropped from the Plans because they default on their repayment obligations.<sup>157</sup> However, given how generous the Plan benefits are for high-debt enrollees, and given the relatively high level of financial sophistication and understanding of administrative compliance procedures of law graduates, one would expect the rates at which law graduate enrollees are dropped from the IBR or PAYE Plans as a result of payment default or failure to supply the required annual income verification to be very low; much lower than for other enrollees who have generally lesser sophistication and much less at stake in remaining enrolled in their Plans. But just how much lower these rates of enrollee attrition among law graduates are and will be in the future compared to the significant overall average attrition rates is unclear.<sup>158</sup> The DOE

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<sup>156</sup> Kelly Field, “Thousands Fall Out of Income-Based Repayment Plans,” Chron. of High. Ed. (April 2, 2015)

<sup>157</sup> *Id.* at \_\_\_ [cite to default figures]

<sup>158</sup> Michael Simkovic has estimated that the student loan two-year cohort default rate among law graduates is in the very low range of 1.4% to 1.7%, well below the comparable 13.9% default rate for undergraduate borrowers, and 7.6% for Master’s Degree, Doctoral Degree

has again unfortunately not provided public information that disaggregates the rate at which IBR and PAYE enrollees are dropped from the Plans and not subsequently reinstated by the nature of their educational degrees, or by the size of their debt loads upon enrollment. For the purpose of my illustrative calculations I will assume the rates of default among Plan law graduate enrollees are so vanishingly small that they can safely be ignored, and that all Plan law graduate enrollees will remain enrolled and in good standing under their Plan until they later qualify for debt forgiveness.<sup>159</sup>

Let me now combine the above estimates that I have made as to the number of Plan law graduate enrollees each year from 2007 onwards with my earlier estimates presented in Part IV.B. above as to the relative proportions of old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan enrollments among those law graduates qualifying for debt forgiveness each year starting in 2032 so as to project the number of law graduate enrollees under each of those two Plans who will qualify for debt forgiveness in 2032, and in each following year:

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and professional school borrowers. Michael Simkovic, “Financing a Legal Education,” Presentation for the ABA Task Force on the Financing of Legal Education (Aug. 9, 2014), at 7. Moreover, one would expect the rate of default among law graduate Plan enrollees to be lower than this already-low default rate among all law graduates given the generally lower monthly payment obligations required by these Plans as compared to the loan repayment obligations otherwise borne by borrowers.

<sup>159</sup> *Id.*

2032: 3,221 total enrollees, including 2,850 old IBR Plan 2007 enrollees and 371 PAYE Plan 2012 enrollees<sup>160</sup>

2033: 5,096 total enrollees, including 2,850 old IBR Plan 2008 enrollees and 2,246 PAYE Plan 2013 enrollees<sup>161</sup>

2034: 6,783 total enrollees, including 2,850 old IBR Plan 2009 enrollees and 3,933 PAYE Plan 2014 enrollees<sup>162</sup>

2035: 7,974 total enrollees, including 2,850 old IBR Plan 2010 enrollees and 5,124 PAYE Plan 2015 enrollees<sup>163</sup>

2036: 8,849 total enrollees, including 2,850 old IBR Plan 2011 enrollees and 5,999 PAYE Plan 2016 enrollees<sup>164</sup>

2037: 9,580 total enrollees, including 2,480 old IBR Plan 2012 enrollees and 7,100 PAYE Plan 2017 enrollees<sup>165</sup>

2038: 23,069 total enrollees, including 15,034 old IBR Plan 2013 enrollees and 8,035 PAYE Plan 2018 enrollees<sup>166</sup>

2039: 22,239 total enrollees, including 13,167 old IBR Plan 2014 enrollees and 9,072 PAYE Plan 2019 enrollees<sup>167</sup>

2040: 21,221 total enrollees, including 10,889 old IBR Plan 2015 enrollees and 10,332 PAYE Plan 2020 enrollees<sup>168</sup>

2041: 19,876 total enrollees, including 8,284 old IBR Plan 2016 enrollees and 11,592 PAYE Plan 2021 enrollees<sup>169</sup>

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160  $2,850 + (2,850 \times .13) = 3,221.$

161  $2,850 + (17,280 \times .13) = 5,096.$

162  $2,850 + (17,100 \times .23) = 6,783.$

163  $2,850 + (16,103 \times .32) = 7,974.$

164  $2,850 + (14,283 \times .42) = 8,849.$

165  $(2,850 \times .87) + (13,653 \times .52) = 9,580.$

166  $(17,100 \times .87) + (12,960 \times .62) = 23,069.$

167  $(16,013 \times .77) + (12,600 \times .72) = 22,239.$

168  $(16,013 \times .68) + (12,600 \times .82) = 21,221.$

169  $(14,283 \times .58) + (12,600 \times .92) = 19,876.$

2042: 19,153 total enrollees, including 6,553 old IBR Plan 2017 enrollees and 12,600 PAYE Plan 2022 enrollees<sup>170</sup>

2043: 17,525 total enrollees, including 4,925 old IBR Plan 2018 enrollees and 12,600 PAYE Plan 2023 enrollees<sup>171</sup>

2044: 16,128 total enrollees, including 3,528 old IBR Plan 2019 enrollees and 12,600 PAYE Plan 2024 enrollees<sup>172</sup>

2045: 14,868 total enrollees, including 2,268 old IBR Plan 2020 enrollees and 12,600 PAYE Plan 2025 enrollees<sup>173</sup>

2046: 13,608 total enrollees, including 1,008 old IBR Plan 2021 enrollees and 12,600 PAYE Plan 2026 enrollees<sup>174</sup>

2047 and thereafter: 12,600 enrollees each year (all PAYE Plan enrollees)<sup>175</sup>

With these estimates of the number of law graduate enrollees in each Plan that will qualify for debt forgiveness in each year starting in 2032 I am now able to estimate the aggregate tax liability that will be imposed each year on these law graduates.

#### E. The Overall Annual Debt Forgiveness Tax Liability Imposed on Lawyers

Using the tax liabilities calculated in Part IV.C. above for hypothetical average 2014 old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan enrollees of \$17,000 and \$70,000, respectively,

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$$170 (13,653 \times .48) + 12,600 = 19,153.$$

$$171 (12,960 \times .38) + 12,600 = 17,525.$$

$$172 (12,600 \times .28) + 12,600 = 16,128.$$

$$173 (12,600 \times .18) + 12,600 = 14,868.$$

$$174 (12,600 \times .08) + 12,600 = 13,608.$$

$$175 (12,600 \times .0) + 12,600 = 12,600.$$

and using the estimates calculated in Part IV.D. above of the number of enrollees in each Plan who will qualify for debt forgiveness each year, I reach the following annual aggregate debt forgiveness tax liability estimates:

2032: \$85.8 million<sup>176</sup>

2033: \$217.1 million<sup>177</sup>

2034: \$335.2 million<sup>178</sup>

2035: \$418.5 million<sup>179</sup>

2036: \$479.9 million<sup>180</sup>

2037: \$549.1 million<sup>181</sup>

2038: \$878.2 million<sup>182</sup>

2039: \$911.5 million<sup>183</sup>

2040: \$953.2 million<sup>184</sup>

2041: \$995.4 million<sup>185</sup>

2042: \$1,019.6 billion<sup>186</sup>

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$$176 (2,850 \times \$21,000) + (371 \times \$70,000) = \$85,820,000$$

$$177 (2,850 \times \$21,000) + (2,246 \times \$70,000) = \$217,070,000.$$

$$178 (2,850 \times \$21,000) + (3,933 \times \$70,000) = \$335,160,000.$$

$$179 (2,850 \times \$21,000) + (5,124 \times \$70,000) = \$418,530,000.$$

$$180 (2,850 \times \$21,000) + (5,999 \times \$70,000) = \$479,930,000.$$

$$181 (2,480 \times \$21,000) + (7,100 \times \$70,000) = \$549,080,000.$$

$$182 (15,034 \times \$21,000) + (8,035 \times \$70,000) = \$878,164,000.$$

$$183 (13,167 \times \$21,000) + (9,072 \times \$70,000) = \$911,547,000.$$

$$184 (10,950 \times \$21,000) + (10,332 \times \$70,000) = \$953,190,000.$$

$$185 (8,284 \times \$21,000) + (11,592 \times \$70,000) = \$995,440,000.$$

$$186 (6,553 \times \$21,000) + (12,600 \times \$70,000) = \$1,019,613,000.$$

2043: \$985.4 million<sup>187</sup>

2044: \$956.1 million<sup>188</sup>

2045: \$929.7 million<sup>189</sup>

2046: \$904.4 million<sup>190</sup>

2047 and thereafter: \$882.0 million per year.<sup>191</sup>

I have finally reached my bottom-line tax liability projections; let me here summarize my results. The number of mid-career lawyers who will be subject to debt forgiveness tax liability under one or another of the Plans will gradually grow from slightly over 3,000 persons in 2032 to about 10,000 persons by 2037, and then from 2038 on will average around 20,000 persons/year for the next five years before gradually declining to 12,600 persons/year by 2047 and thereafter. The aggregate annual tax obligation borne by these groups of lawyers will rapidly grow from initially about \$86 million in 2032 and \$217 million in 2033 up to an average of about \$950 million/year by 2038 and for the next decade, and will remain at approximately \$882 million/year in later years. In the initial years from 2032 onwards much of that tax liability will be imposed on old IBR Plan enrollees, in amounts averaging only about \$21,000 apiece, but over the years a larger and

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187  $(4,925 \times \$21,000) + (12,600 \times \$70,000) = \$985,425,000.$

188  $(3,528 \times \$21,000) + (12,600 \times \$70,000) = \$956,088,000.$

189  $(2,268 \times \$21,000) + (12,600 \times \$70,000) = \$929,628,000.$

190  $(1,008 \times \$21,000) + (12,600 \times \$70,000) = \$904,360,000.$

191  $12,600 \times \$70,000 = \$882,000,000.$

larger proportion of that tax liability will be imposed each year upon PAYE Plan enrollees, in amounts averaging about \$70,000 apiece, and overall tax payments will consequently grow substantially.

As I have discussed above, the size of these individual and aggregate annual tax liability estimates are sensitive in a linear fashion to the assumptions made regarding the rates of PAYE and old IBR Plan law graduate enrollment in the coming years, which I have estimated will stabilize at approximately 40% of the size of each year's graduating law school class,<sup>192</sup> and the overall revenue estimates will vary upwards or downwards from my estimates roughly in proportion to changes in that rate of enrollment.<sup>193</sup> These estimates are also particularly sensitive to the assumptions made regarding the annual rate of growth in the real income of Plan enrollees after their enrollment. If one assumes that Plan enrollees will obtain average annual salary increases larger than the 5% average annual increases that I have utilized for my estimates, then the amount of debt forgiven and tax liability borne by PAYE Plan enrollees and especially by old IBR Plan enrollees will be significantly reduced.<sup>194</sup>

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192 *See supra* n. 137.

193 *See supra* n. 135.

194 As I have previously discussed, my estimates for the tax liability borne by average PAYE Plan and especially old IBR Plan enrollees are sensitive to my initial assumptions as to the rate of annual real income growth for these Plan enrollees after their enrollment. If one assumes a higher 6% average annual salary increase, and a consequent 3% annual rate of growth

Let me offer the reader who has been patient enough to follow my analysis this far two final reminders. First of all, those \$21,000 and \$70,000 average tax liabilities that I have calculated for old IBR Plan and PAYE Plan enrollees are just that, only averages. Some individual Plan enrollees will owe less and some will owe considerably more than these average amounts. Some PAYE Plan enrollees could even owe as much as \$100,000 or more in taxes, given a larger-than-average

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in real income, rather than the comparable 5%/2% figures that I have used in the main text calculations, then the tax liability imposed on an average PAYE Plan enrollee will be reduced only by 11.2%, *see supra* n. 94, but the tax liability imposed upon the average old IBR enrollee will be reduced by a full 92.2% down to a very small sum, although some and possibly even most old IBR enrollees will still bear some modest amounts of tax liability, *see supra* n. 105. The overall amount of tax liability imposed on Plan enrollees in each year will be correspondingly reduced, with the precise amount of reduction in a particular year depending on the mixture of PAYE Plan and old IBR Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness in that year. In the first decade after 2032, when a large proportion of the Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness are old IBR enrollees, with 6% average annual salary growth the aggregate tax liability imposed will be substantially less than what I have estimated. However, by 2043 and thereafter a much larger proportion of the Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness will be PAYE Plan enrollees, and even with 6% average annual salary growth the aggregate tax liability imposed will be almost 90% as much as what I have estimated.

If one assumes an even higher 7% average annual salary increases and a consequent 4% annual rate of growth in real income, then the tax liability imposed on an average PAYE Plan enrollee will still be reduced by only 21.7%, *see supra* n. 94, but the tax liability that would have been imposed upon old IBR enrollees will now be eliminated altogether for virtually all of these enrollees, *see supra* n. 105. The overall amount of tax liability imposed on Plan enrollees in each year will again be correspondingly reduced, with the precise amount of reduction in a particular year again depending on the mixture of PAYE Plan and old IBR Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness in that year. Once again, in the first decade after 2032, when a large proportion of the Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness are old IBR enrollees, with 7% average annual salary growth the aggregate tax liability imposed will be substantially less than what I have estimated. However, by 2043 and thereafter a much larger proportion of the Plan enrollees qualifying for debt forgiveness will be PAYE Plan enrollees, and even with 7% average annual salary growth the aggregate tax liability imposed will be almost 80% as much as what I have estimated.

debt load at the time of Plan enrollment and/or an unfavorable income experience. Second, these estimates are only made for law graduate Plan enrollees and do not include the debt forgiveness tax liabilities that may be borne by other Plan enrollees who have taken on relatively large debt burdens and/or who have an unfavorable later income experience. The magnitude of the tax bomb on all Plan enrollees will be larger, perhaps significantly so, than its impact on law graduates alone.

F. The Effects of Inflation on the “Real” Burden Imposed on Lawyers by the Tax Bomb.

It should not be overlooked that the debt forgiveness tax liabilities that will be imposed on IBR and PAYE Plan enrollees in 2032 or thereafter will be paid in dollars that due to price inflation over the intervening decades since their enrollment are likely to be of substantially less purchasing power than were the student loan dollars originally borrowed 20 or 25 years earlier. Under the assumption that I am utilizing of annual price inflation rates of 3% the burden of a dollar of tax liability that is imposed on a taxpayer in 2032 or thereafter due to cancellation of indebtedness will be equivalent in “real” terms to only

approximately \$0.55 of tax burden imposed 20 years earlier,<sup>195</sup> and to only approximately \$0.48 of tax burden imposed 25 years earlier.<sup>196</sup> Looked at in this way, the “real” burden of the tax bomb for IBR or PAYE Plan enrollees will only be approximately half as large as it would be were those tax obligations to be denominated in dollars of the same purchasing power as those borrowed in the underlying student loans. Cancellation of indebtedness income tax liability is not indexed to inflation rates, so as a practical matter in a world of 3% annual price inflation the taxes imposed on debt forgiven after 20 or 25 years will be only about half as burdensome as they would be in a world of stable prices. The likely persistence over the coming decades of modest annual inflation rates in the neighborhood of 3% will therefore significantly reduce (by about half) the social impact of the debt forgiveness tax bomb for all IBR and PAYE Plan enrollees, law graduates as well as others.

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195  $1.03^{20} = 1.806$ , and  $1/1.806 = 0.55$ .

196  $1.03^{25} = 2.094$ , and  $1/2.094 = 0.48$ .

## V. DEFUSING THE TAX BOMB

There are a number of ways that the tax bomb problem could be avoided, or at least have its impacts upon law graduates mitigated to some extent. One possible approach would be a legislative amendment to the Internal Revenue Code. Another approach would be legislative amendment of the statutes establishing the IBR and PAYE Plans. Finally, there could be changes made in the DOE administrative rules governing the PAYE Plan. Various measures along these lines will surely be proposed during the next decade-and-a-half before these tax obligations begin coming due in the early 2030's.

I will first consider the arguments that can be offered for and against such measures as a matter of social policy, and offer my thoughts regarding the merits of these arguments. Second, assuming for the sake of argument that some measures to eliminate or at least mitigate the impacts of the tax bomb may be called for, I will then consider several possible actions that might be taken. Let me initially very briefly describe the main features of each of these proposed actions, and I will then later discuss them in more detail.

The first proposal that I will consider is an amendment to Section 108(f)(1) of the Code that would eliminate the tax bomb altogether for all Plan enrollees.

The second proposal that I will discuss is a more modest amendment to the Code that would leave the debt forgiveness tax liability in force, but which would allow Plan enrollees to pay these taxes over several years rather requiring them to do so in the year in which the debt is forgiven, without undue penalty. The third measure that I will discuss is a legislative amendment that would limit IBR and PAYE Plan eligibility to only the first \$57,500 or so of loan debt. Finally, the last approach that I will consider is legislation and DOE administrative action that would together prospectively reimpose the original IBR requirement of monthly repayments of 15% of discretionary income for new enrollees in all of the Plans.

#### A. Arguments For and Against Defusing the Tax Bomb.

There is obviously a straightforward argument of a contractual nature that can be offered for leaving in place the current legal framework that will impose these debt forgiveness tax liability consequences on Plan enrollees, law graduates and others, despite the substantial individual tax liabilities that I have shown will be imposed on some of these enrollees. Let me briefly summarize that argument. First of all, those enrollees probably were (or will be) aware at the time of their enrollment of the Code's provisions regarding the tax treatment of cancellation of indebtedness income when they contractually agree to the terms of these Plans. If not, they should be charged with constructive notice of those legal provisions; after

all they are lawyers! Those enrollees will benefit significantly for many years from the generous low monthly repayment terms of those Plans and it therefore entirely fair and appropriate to hold them to the somewhat less advantageous but still relatively generous debt forgiveness taxation aspects of the Plans. Enrollees who are granted not only generous monthly repayment terms which allow for significant negative amortization but also substantial amounts of later debt forgiveness should not in good conscience begrudge having to bear only the lesser amount of income taxes that are imposed on that forgiven debt that they have to contractually agreed to, taxes that are also imposed by the Code on most other classes of debtors with forgiven debts.

In addition, as I have demonstrated eliminating the tax bomb would create tax revenue losses of upwards of \$900 million dollars per year or more by 2038 even if one considers only the tax impacts upon law graduates and not upon other Plan enrollees. This revenue shortfall would require either that substantial additional taxes be imposed on other taxpayers to make up for that lost revenue, or else would lead to a further increase of the federal financial deficit in those years, both unattractive alternatives.

There is also a distributional equity argument that can be made against mitigating the tax bomb impacts on law graduates. The thousands of IBR or

PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees who will qualify for debt forgiveness each year in 2032 or later will be a group of mid-career lawyers who will on average surely have incomes at that time in their lives that are far in excess of the overall average national income. Conferring individual tax benefits from \$10,000 or so up to as much as \$100,000 or more upon such a narrow group of on average relatively affluent persons, at the expense of the larger taxpaying public, is a distributionally regressive step that those persons of an egalitarian persuasion might oppose on that basis alone. Finally, given that steady price inflation over the decades after Plan enrollment will likely reduce the real burden of any debt forgiveness tax liabilities much later imposed by about half, the more modest “real” magnitude of the tax bomb impacts on even the most affected PAYE Plan enrollees does not justify any changes in the law other than perhaps allowing enrollees to pay these debt forgiveness tax obligations over several years without undue penalty.

In response to these plausible arguments for leaving the tax bomb aspects of the Plans in place the advocates for mitigation measures can also offer a reasonably persuasive counter-argument, one based upon paternalistic principles rather than upon contractual premises and revenue implications. It has been shown beyond reasonable argument that people are often very poor long-term financial planners, as is demonstrated most clearly by the strikingly high proportion of employees

who fail to contribute enough to their employers' 401(k) or 403(b) retirement plans even to obtain the employer matching contributions,<sup>197</sup> in most instances a virtual no-brainer financial decision. And as this article demonstrates the calculation of the amount of debt forgiveness tax liability that a Plan enrollee will face decades later is a far more complicated undertaking than is ordinary retirement planning. It is simply not realistic to expect enrollees to exhibit the extraordinary foresight and computational ability necessary to be able to determine how large their eventual debt forgiveness tax liability will be two or more decades later, and then to exhibit the extreme self-discipline necessary to set aside upwards of a hundred thousand dollars for a 2030's or 2040's tax eventuality. One need not embrace the more extreme arguments offered by some behavioral economists as to the pervasiveness and severity of departures from rationality to recognize that holding Plan law graduate enrollees to the often-overlooked or under-appreciated debt forgiveness tax liability aspects of those complicated Plans will damage or even devastate the retirement finances of thousands of mid-career attorneys each year who have failed to make the necessary provisions to pay those taxes.<sup>198</sup>

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197 [cite to data on 401(k) rates of contributions]

198 One writer who takes this position is Layman (2011), *supra* n. 48, who calls for exemption of debt forgiven under the IBR Plan from taxation to avoid having taxpayers subject to "massive tax liability in a single year." *Id.* at 155.

Some additional non-paternalistic arguments can also be advanced in favor of reducing or eliminating the tax bomb impacts. The nominal interest rates charged by the federal government for student loans and especially for graduate and professional student and law student loans far exceed the costs to the federal government of obtaining the funding for such loans through the usual issuance of 10-year maturity Treasury bonds, which as of June 4, 2015 pay only annual returns of about 2.25%.<sup>199</sup> Even if one takes into account both the administrative costs to the government of making these student loans and the government's losses from a significant number of loan defaults there is still such a large margin between the high nominal interest rates charged borrowers and the Treasury's very low funding costs that those loans will still on balance generate a substantial annual profit.<sup>200</sup>

This is particularly true for graduate and professional student loans, which are made at significantly higher loan interest rates than are undergraduate loans,<sup>201</sup> and

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199 [cite]

200 There are disagreements regarding the proper discount rate to use to determine whether a program such as IBR generates a profit to the government or not. Some analysts argue for discounting expected governmental receipts by the governmental borrowing rate, which is required for some purposes under the Federal Credit Reform Act, Section 502(5)(E), 2 U.S.C. Section 661a(5)(E), while others argue for use of what is called "fair value accounting" which uses higher market borrowing rates which arguably better reflect market risk. But there are also strong arguments that can be made against use of the fair-value approach, and it is not the dominant methodology. *See, e.g.*, David Kamin, "Risky Returns: Accounting for Risk in the Federal Budget," 88 *Ind. L.J.* 723 (2013).

201 *See supra* at the text corresponding to n. 71-77.

where the rate of borrower default is much less than for undergraduate loans.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, the default rates for law graduate borrowers are especially low, significantly lower than even the relatively low default rates for all graduate and professional students.<sup>203</sup> Even under the negative amortization loan repayments that many Plan law graduate and other graduate and professional school enrollees are permitted to make for a substantial portion of their required repayment period,<sup>204</sup> the total amount of repayment from Plan enrollees will still result in a profit over and above the government's funding costs and other expenses for those loans.<sup>205</sup> Given this fact, it no longer appears to be so unduly generous for the government to eventually forgive those unpaid student loan debts after 20 to 25 years of regular repayments without imposing a tax obligation on that forgiven debt.<sup>206</sup> The distributional equity argument against providing tax relief to Plan enrollees at the expense of the general taxpayer public that I have noted above does appear to be quite so persuasive once one realizes that those law graduate Plan enrollees who would concededly benefit the most from any across-the-board

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202 *See supra* n. 158.

203 *Id.*

<sup>204</sup> *See supra* n. 91, 104.

205 Although this may not be the case if “fair-value accounting” methods are used to determine the discount rate to apply to those repayment receipts. *Id.*

206 *But see Id.*

student loan debt forgiveness tax relief measures are exactly the persons who are arguably being overcharged the most on their federal student loans.

It should be recognized that the government already allows debt forgiveness for student loan debt without imposing tax liability under the PSLF Plan, after Plan enrollees take a qualifying public service position and then make only 10 years of new IBR Plan and PAYE Plan-size 10% of discretionary income required repayments. Moreover, many governmental positions that one would regard as primarily providing a “public service” only under an arguably unduly inclusive definition of that phrase qualify for the PSLF Plan. So why not also allow the student loan debt that is forgiven after a much longer 20- or even 25-year period of regular debt repayments under the Plans by persons who have engaged in a broader range of private sector occupations, many of which also have at least indirect beneficial effects for the larger public, to at least partially avoid taxation on this forgiven debt?

Finally, an argument can also be made that unlike many debts that are used to finance the acquisition of tangible property – and therefore at least in some instances provide the borrower with a tangible asset that can later be liquidated to pay a debt forgiveness tax bill -- the educational “asset” that student loans finance is much less tangible and less easily converted to cash on short notice to pay debt

forgiveness taxes, and that student loan debts merit more favorable tax treatment on that basis alone.<sup>207</sup>

Often in tax policy efficiency considerations are important, and sometimes even paramount. Almost everyone would agree that maintaining taxpayer incentives to act in a socially wealth-maximizing fashion is an important objective to be taken into account along with other policy goals. However, none of the measures that I will later propose as ways to address tax bomb issue considered in this article appear to raise significant efficiency concerns that would complicate the analysis of those measures. Let me explain.

Those persons who have already enrolled in one or another of the Plans are not as a practical matter likely to significantly change their saving or spending behavior during their subsequent long required repayment period on account of a reduction or even elimination of their debt forgiveness tax liability, a liability that will not affect them until about two decades or more later. It is true that at the later time of debt forgiveness a change in the tax liability rules that has been made years earlier to reduce or eliminate those taxes may have a significant impact on that year's tax liability for some enrollees. Such a change will lead the Plan enrollees thereby affected to use their increased after-tax income in that year of debt

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<sup>207</sup> See, e.g., Laplante, *supra* n. 155, at 712-14.

forgiveness for more spending and/or more saving in some proportions. Unless these aggregate spending and savings changes by these enrollees in that particular year are offset in the aggregate by the combined spending and savings reduction impacts of comparably higher taxes imposed on other taxpayers there may be some rather modest (if even noticeable) macroeconomic impacts from the slightly increased government deficits. The nature of these impacts, however, will depend upon whether the economy is at a state of full employment at that time, or is instead at a state of underemployment and deficient aggregate demand, which of course is something that is impossible to accurately forecast two or more decades in advance.<sup>208</sup> Overall, I think that any possible efficiency consequences will be minimal and can be safely ignored in addressing this tax bomb question.

So there is the controversy squarely presented. Given that these sharply conflicting arguments for and against mitigating the impacts of the tax bomb derive from very different initial premises, whether legislative or administrative measures should be taken to mitigate or even eliminate the tax bomb impacts upon law graduate Plan enrollees and other enrollees is clearly a question regarding which reasonable persons can differ. Probably everyone would agree that persons considering enrolling in the IBR or PAYE Plans should at the least be provided

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<sup>208</sup> I am in making this statement implicitly embracing a Keynesian view of the macroeconomic impacts of deficit financing, which not everyone accepts.

with clear and accurate information regarding the law governing debt forgiveness tax obligations, and as to the likely magnitude of those taxes they will face given their initial debt loads and their salary and other financial circumstances at the time of their enrollment, and the advantages of making provision to set aside sufficient funds to pay these later tax obligations well in advance. But should we go further than merely providing prospective Plan enrollees with better information, and also more paternalistically change the law in some fashion that will later benefit these current and future Plan enrollees when their debts are forgiven?

I am personally ambivalent as to the proper resolution of this difficult question, but I have tentatively concluded that the law should not be changed except for the adoption of a relatively minor amendment to the Code which would allow persons that are subject to tax liability for forgiven student loan debt to pay those taxes off over several years, rather than requiring them to pay all of those taxes in the year in which the debt is forgiven, without undue penalty. Given the strong contractual and distributional equity arguments noted above that can be made in favor of enforcing the current debt forgiveness tax obligations, I do not believe that that any further action beyond allowing those Plan enrollees who face large debt forgiveness tax liabilities in 2032 or afterwards to pay those taxes over a several-year period is called for.

However, obviously not all persons will agree with this conclusion<sup>209</sup> so let me proceed for the remainder of this article under the assumption that some mitigating measures beyond what I recommend are called for, and I will offer several possible approaches for consideration.

#### B. Measures to Reduce or Eliminate the Impact of the Tax Bomb upon Lawyers.

Let me present and discuss several possible measures to address the tax bomb problem, although of course other approaches to the problem are also possible. First of all, I will consider the straightforward approach of a legislative amendment to Section 108(f)(1) of the Code that would simply eliminate altogether the tax liability upon forgiven federal student loan debt for all Plan enrollees and future enrollees. Second, I will then consider as alternatives to legislatively eliminating the tax bomb altogether each of several more limited measures that could be adopted, either alone or in combination, and that would each significantly reduce although not eliminate the impacts of the tax bomb.

The first of these more limited alternative measures would be a legislative amendment to the Code that would simply allow those persons subject to

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<sup>209</sup> See, e.g., Layman (2011), *supra* n. 48, who favors abolishing tax liability for debt forgiven under the IBR Plan, a position that I do not favor.

substantial debt forgiveness tax liability on the basis of forgiven student loan debts to pay those tax obligations over a period of several years, rather than all in the year in which the debt is forgiven, without undue penalty. Second, I will consider the possibility of legislation that would prospectively limit future eligibility for all of the Plans for both graduate and undergraduate borrowers to only include under the Plans the amount of federal loan debt that is allowed for undergraduate borrowers, currently \$57,500,<sup>210</sup> leaving borrowers to repay any other student loan debt they may have outside of those Plans. Such legislation would prevent virtually all law graduates and other high-debt borrowers from in the future putting themselves into a position under the old IBR Plan and especially under the new IBR or PAYE Plans where they might later bear very large tax liability for forgiven debt. Finally, I will consider the combination of legislation and DOE administrative action that would together reimpose the original IBR requirement of minimum monthly repayments of 15% of disposable income for all future Plan enrollees, rather than the current 10% requirement now allowed under some of those Plans. Such action would significantly reduce the debt forgiveness tax liability for most new IBR Plan and PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees.

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210 34 C.F.R. Section 685.203(e).

1. Amendment of the Internal Revenue Code to Eliminate Taxation of Debt Forgiven under the IBR or PAYE Plans.

Consider an amendment to Code Section 108(f)(1) that would supplement it in the following manner (the added language is underlined):

“In the case of an individual, gross income does not include any amount which (but for this subsection) would be includible in gross income by reason of the discharge (in whole or in part) of any student loan if such discharge was pursuant to a provision of such loan under which all or part of the indebtedness of the individual would be discharged if the individual worked for a certain period of time in certain professions for any of a broad class of employers, or if such discharge was pursuant to a provision of any federal income-based or income-contingent loan repayment program.”

One could perhaps use somewhat more technical language than I have proposed above to more clearly delimit the new classes of loan debts exempt from taxation.<sup>211</sup> This simple amendment would eliminate the student loan debt forgiveness tax obligations of all current and future Plan enrollees; problem solved. However, there would for the reasons that I have discussed above likely be substantial opposition raised to any substantial legislative reduction in the debt forgiveness tax liability of both existing and future Plan enrollees, and certainly to the complete abolishment of such tax liability. As noted above, I do not favor such

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211 For example, Jonathan Layman suggests the following language: “or (B) such discharge was pursuant to subsections (d)(1)(D) and (e)(7) of section 455, or section 493C(b)(7), of the higher Education Act of 1965 (relating to income contingent and income based repayment, respectively.” Layman (2011), *supra* n. 48, at 156.

drastic action. And absent a strong public consensus expressed in its favor such a proposal is unlikely to garner sufficiently broad political support to survive the currently highly polarized and gridlocked Congressional process, particularly with regard to taxation matters, and then obtain Presidential approval.

I have noted in Part V.A. above several reasons why it would probably be impossible to obtain a sufficiently broad consensus to legislatively abolish debt forgiveness tax liability for debt discharged under the Plans. There are the strong contractual arguments noted above for holding Plan enrollees to the terms of their Plans. In addition, there is the cost of the lost tax revenues that such an amendment would entail, which as I have demonstrated will probably be on the order of \$800 million to \$900 million or more each year from 2038 onwards just for the Plan law graduate enrollees alone, and the revenue losses would be larger than these amounts, perhaps significantly so, when all of the other Plan enrollees who will qualify for debt forgiveness are also considered. Whether it was proposed that these tax benefits be conferred as part of a broader and revenue-neutral set of amendment to the Code – therefore provided at the expense of correspondingly higher taxes imposed upon other taxpayers – or were to be conferred in isolation and therefore resulting in a comparable increase in the size of the annual

government deficit,<sup>212</sup> such a proposal will obviously lead to contentious political debates.

Second, amending the Code to eliminate this student loan debt forgiveness tax liability would have distributional implications that many persons on either side of the Congressional aisles would oppose, particularly those of an egalitarian bent. Such a change would have very concentrated benefits, providing individually large tax savings of \$50,000 up to perhaps \$100,000 or more to a rather small group of relatively affluent PAYE Plan enrollee mid-career lawyers, and tax savings of perhaps \$15,000 up to about \$25,000 to another small group of relatively affluent old IBR Plan enrollee mid-career lawyers, and smaller but still in some instances still significant tax savings of several thousand dollars or more for a somewhat larger group other relatively affluent Plan enrollees with medical or graduate school training or at least undergraduate educations. This measure would therefore on balance have decidedly regressive distributional effects, given that its benefits would be granted at the expense of correspondingly higher taxes imposed upon the broad spectrum of other taxpayers, or at the expense of a comparable increase in the size of the annual government deficits, although as I have noted one could

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212 This is under the assumption that abolishing debt forgiveness tax liability would not have any significant short-term macroeconomic stimulus effects that would increase overall national income, and therefore generate some additional offsetting new tax revenues.

argue that such benefits merely serve to undo the overcharging of those particular Plan enrollees, with their very low loan default rates, that has taken place through the unduly high loan interest rates charged to those classes of borrowers that do not properly reflect those low default rates.

A legislative amendment to the Code that would eliminate the tax bomb altogether is unlikely to even emerge from House or Senate Congressional committee hearings, in my opinion, let alone be adopted into law.<sup>213</sup> Let me now turn to several more modest legislative or administrative measures that may be more promising options to pursue for those who favor reducing the magnitude of the tax bomb.

## 2. Amendment of the Internal Revenue Code to Allow Taxes Imposed on Forgiven Student Loan Debt to be Paid Over a Several-Year Period

As I have discussed there will probably be debt forgiveness tax obligations imposed on many PAYE Plan graduate enrollees of \$50,000 to \$100,000 or even larger amounts from 2032 onwards. Since these taxes will be imposed on imputed income that is not actually received those enrollees who at that time have limited

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<sup>213</sup> I note in passing that such a legislative proposal would not provide any tax benefits until 2032 and later, and therefore would not have revenue consequences within the first 10 years after adoption, and therefore would not be required to be subjected to the Congressional Budget Office scoring process that would make such a proposal more politically visible and probably also more controversial. [cite to rules for getting CBO scoring on tax proposals]

assets, or whose assets are not in liquid form, may have difficulty coming up with sufficient funds to pay those taxes in the year of debt forgiveness. If they are instead permitted to pay these debt forgiveness taxes over a several-year period, perhaps over as much as five years, and can do so subject to at most a nominal interest rate sufficient to offset the Treasury's borrowing costs on the deferred tax payments, this will alleviate the problems of many if not most of those law graduate enrollees whose difficulties are primarily of a cash flow nature rather than relative poverty without adversely impacting the public fisc.<sup>214</sup> I favor adoption of such a Code amendment along these general lines to allow deferred tax payments, and I believe that this is the only change in the law that should be made.<sup>215</sup>

### 3. Legislative Restriction of the Amount of Loan Debt that can be Repaid under the IBR or PAYE Plans

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214 For example, suppose that the Code was changed to allow Plan enrollees to pay their debt forgiveness tax liability over five years of equal-size payments, but with a 3% annual interest rate also imposed on the deferred payments. Consider the circumstances of an average 2014 enrollee with a \$70,000 debt forgiveness tax liability imposed in 2034 on \$210,000 of forgiven debt. In 2033 that enrollee would owe taxes of  $\$70,000/5 = \$14,000$ . In 2035 they would owe  $\$14,000 \times 1.03 = \$14,420$ . In 2036 they would owe taxes of  $\$14,000 \times (1.03)^2 = \$14,853$ . In 2037 they would owe taxes of  $\$14,000 \times (1.03)^3 = \$15,298$ . And in 2038 they would make their final tax payment of  $\$14,000 \times (1.03)^4 = \$15,757$ . Such a payment schedule would surely help to address enrollee cash flow and liquidity concerns.

<sup>215</sup> See also Laplante, *supra* n. 155, at 724-31 where he discusses the merits of a somewhat similar proposal to provide student loan borrowers with an extended period to pay debt forgiveness taxes.

A third possible measure, in this case a prospective measure that would impact only future Plan enrollees and not current enrollees, would be to legislatively limit the amount of debt that can be repaid through these Plans, perhaps limited to the maximum amount of federal loans that can be taken out by an independent person for the purpose of financing undergraduate studies, currently \$57,500.<sup>216</sup> With this restrictive limit on the amount of enrollee debt that can be covered by the IBR and PAYE Plans future law graduate enrollees would rarely if ever have any remaining unpaid debt after 25 years of making the required repayments on such a modest amount of debt, so they would not bear any significant debt forgiveness tax liability.

While this proposed prospective measure would essentially eliminate the tax bomb for future Plan law graduate enrollees it would not address the looming tax liability problem facing current Plan law graduate enrollees and some other current Plan enrollees with large loan debts. It would leave in place the \$50,000 to \$100,000 or more individual tax obligations that will be coming due for many existing PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees and the probably several hundred million dollars/year of aggregate tax obligations that will be imposed on these enrollees in 2032 and for several years after that. It therefore would fail to mitigate

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<sup>216</sup> 34 C.F.R. Section 685.203(e).

the most pressing aspect of the tax bomb problem if that is what one seeks to achieve.

Moreover, this legislative measure could easily have the unfortunate and unintended collateral consequence of putting a large number of law schools out of business in relatively short order. As I have discussed in some detail in my earlier article, law school enrollments have significantly declined in recent years, and many law schools are now under considerable financial stress.<sup>217</sup> Moreover, most law schools below the handful of schools at the most elite level have become increasingly dependent upon the ability of their students to finance the high tuitions charged with federal student loans that can be repaid under generous Plan terms.<sup>218</sup> A \$57,500 cap on the amount of loan debt that can be repaid under the Plans would reduce the number of persons willing to attend in law school, perhaps dramatically so, threatening the survival of many lower- and mid-tier law schools.<sup>219</sup> There is clearly is pronounced overcapacity in legal education, relative to the number of well-paid attorney positions that are currently available to new law graduates that justify incurring the costs of la legal education. But the sudden reduction in the number of law schools that would probably result fairly quickly

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<sup>217</sup> See generally Crespi (2014), supra n. 27.

<sup>218</sup> *Id.*

<sup>219</sup> *Id.* at 139-40.

from the effective denial of Plan enrollment to high-debt law graduates is probably not the best way to achieve the needed adjustment in legal education to the difficult current labor market conditions for new attorneys. Primarily for this reason I do not favor the adoption of such a restriction on Plan eligibility.

4. Restoration of the Original IBR Requirement of Monthly Repayments of 15% of Discretionary Income.

As one final proposal for the reader's consideration I would suggest simply prospectively restoring the 15% of discretionary income minimum monthly repayment requirement that existed when the IBR program was originally adopted in 2007.<sup>220</sup> That measure would increase the monthly repayment requirements for all future new IBR Plan and PAYE Plan and REPAYE Plan enrollees by 50%.<sup>221</sup> With these larger required repayments the amount of tax liability imposed on these Plan enrollees would be significantly reduced.

For example, the hypothetical "average" 2014 PAYE Plan enrollee with a \$160,000 initial debt load whose circumstances I have extensively considered would now have an initial payment obligation of \$498/month rather than

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<sup>220</sup> College Lost Deduction and Access Act, Pub. L. No. 110-84, 121 Stat. 784 (2007).

<sup>221</sup>  $15\%/10\% = 1.5$ , a 50% increase.

\$332/month,<sup>222</sup> and under my 5% annual salary growth assumptions would now have to make monthly repayments over the 20-year repayment period averaging approximately \$878/month rather than \$585/month.<sup>223</sup> Those 50% larger monthly repayments over the 20-year repayment period would enable that PAYE Plan enrollee to reduce their outstanding debt balance at the time of debt forgiveness to about \$155,000 rather than \$211,000 as I have earlier calculated,<sup>224</sup> thereby reducing their tax liability by about 27% from about \$70,000 down to about \$52,000.<sup>225</sup>

This proposed prospective 50% increase in the size of the required repayments could not, however, be imposed on existing new IBR Plan or PAYE Plan enrollees who have a contractual right under their Plans to only make repayments of 10% of their discretionary income. It would therefore unfortunately not have any impact upon the looming large \$50,000 to \$100,000 or more tax bomb obligations that will come due for many current PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees in 2032 and afterwords.

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222  $\$332/\text{month} \times 1.5 = \$498/\text{month}$ .

223  $\$498/\text{month} \times (1.065)^9 = \$878/\text{month}$ .  $\$332/\text{month} \times (1.065)^9 = \$585/\text{month}$ .

224 *See supra* n. 102, where the amortization results for an old IBR Plan enrollee starting with an initial debt of \$160,000 and \$498 monthly payments are presented.

225  $\$211,000 \times .333 = \$70,333$ .  $\$155,000 \times .333 = \$51,667$ .  $(\$70,333 - \$51,667)/\$70,333 = 0.267$ , a 26.7% reduction in tax liability.

## VI. CONCLUSION

There is a tax bomb primed to go off in 2032 which will each year after that impose increasingly large cancellation of indebtedness-based federal and state income tax liabilities totaling upwards of nine hundred million dollars per year on thousands of mid-career lawyers who have previously incurred large federal student loan debts and who have subsequently enrolled in the federal IBR or PAYE Plans, and who unfortunately have been able to earn only relatively modest annual incomes in the 20 or 25 years following their law school graduation. As I have demonstrated as best I can given the very limited information available these tax bills will often be in the neighborhood of \$50,000 to \$100,000 or more for PAYE Plan law graduate enrollees, and \$10,000 to \$25,000 for old IBR Plan law graduate enrollees.

These tax obligations will be imposed on income that is attributed to but not actually received by these taxpayers, which will create problems. Many of these lawyers will likely have failed to adequately provide for this large tax obligation, and will find that it will impair or even devastate their retirement plans. In addition, each year a larger group of perhaps tens of thousands of people who have incurred loan debts of up to \$50,000 or more to finance medical school or Ph.D. work or other non-legal graduate studies, or undergraduate coursework, and who

over the following two decades have also unfortunately been able to earn only relatively modest incomes, will also under these Plans face cancellation of indebtedness-based income tax bills that could in some cases be fairly substantial, although generally not of the same order of magnitude as the tax liabilities facing lawyers.

Whether some legislative or administrative actions should be taken before 2032 to mitigate or even eliminate this tax bomb is a difficult question regarding which reasonable people can differ. I have concluded that no action should be taken except for a minor amendment to the Internal Revenue Code that would allow persons subject to debt forgiveness tax obligations based on discharged student loan debt to pay those taxes over several years, rather than having to pay it all in the year in which the debt is forgiven, without undue penalty. However, since some people believe that further mitigation efforts are called for I have suggested and discussed several possible alternative measures that could be pursued, ranging from a legislative amendment to the Internal Revenue Code that would eliminate altogether any debt forgiveness tax liability for Plan enrollees down to some more modest legislative or administrative measures that would have more limited and/or only prospective tax liability-reducing effects for future Plan

enrollees. I hope by this article to contribute to a more informed discussion of this question prior to the first tax bomb obligations that will be coming due in 2032.