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Investing in strategies to boost degree completion, not free college (opinion)

Authored by
Stephen J. Handel and Eileen L. Strempel
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“Free college” proposals are at the forefront of state and federal policy making, garnering frequent online and newspaper headlines. Central to these conversations is an almost universal agreement that some postsecondary education is necessary for our nation’s citizens to have a good chance of gaining a family-sustaining job and entering the middle class.

A recent [Student Voice survey](#),^[1] of 2,035 students reveals significant support for free college proposals during a time when COVID-19 has impacted nearly every aspect of American life. The broad support among students for these proposals is both exciting and promising. Yet it’s not clear that this approach is the best higher education investment we can make as part of the Biden administration plan to [Build Back Better](#).^[2]

The survey, conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse and presented by Kaplan, found that students are most supportive of free college proposals that cover fees and tuition at community colleges, as opposed to free four-year college. More than 70 percent of students strongly support the free community college movement, and another 19 percent are “somewhat supportive,” which demonstrates a degree of unanimity rarely seen among the populace regarding education policy issues.

Women are more supportive than men (78 percent as compared to 62 percent), perhaps reflecting the rising tide of female participation in college the past two decades, or, perhaps, it’s the understanding that their economic

livelihood is especially linked to increasing dependence on skills gained from a postsecondary degree.

There is also similar support for free community college proposals among students from various racial and ethnic groups. African Americans are the strongest supporters of these proposals (84 percent), followed by Latinx students (80 percent), Asian American students (73 percent) and white students (65 percent). This trend might represent the fact that African American and Hispanic/Latino students are more likely to attend community colleges rather than four-year institutions.

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Despite the almost universal support for some kind of free college proposals, such initiatives -- whether at the state or federal level -- solve a problem that does not exist. In fact, if fully implemented, free college proposals would only exacerbate higher education's overriding problem: the degree completion gap.

Access to U.S. colleges and universities is not the most compelling challenge in higher education. America has one of the highest postsecondary participation rates in the world. However, only about six in 10 of students attending a four-year institution leave with a degree in hand. And at community colleges, which serve the greatest number of students from underrepresented groups, completion rates are even lower. Despite some gains in associate degree attainment, a [recent report from the Center for American Progress](#) ^[3] documents large and persistent attainment gaps by race and ethnicity. For example, although Hispanic/Latino students have made the most impressive gains in degree attainment, they remain the least likely to complete a degree (30.6 percent). This is 27 points behind white students.

While we applaud the good intentions associated with free college proposals, they are unlikely to boost degree attainment. That's because our most underserved students need something more than an open door to college; they need additional supports that will propel them toward a certificate or a degree. For example, about one-third of all community college students have

children. The ability of those students to complete college is directly dependent on access to quality childcare, a service inadequately provided on most college campuses. Textbooks have become increasingly expensive, but few free college proposals address the significant needs of students beyond tuition costs (which, for our neediest students, are covered by Pell Grants).

Free college proposals also pose an additional problem. Like many issues in the U.S. right now, support for state and federal government proposals designed to boost college-going differs significantly along political lines.

For example, the Student Voice survey indicates that although 85 percent of students who lean Democratic support these proposals, only 30 percent of Republican-leaning students are similarly predisposed to free college initiatives. We are unlikely to build support across the political aisle for any of these proposals if we don't implement strategies that help institutions become more effective at helping students attain their credential rather than accumulate the worst combination possible: some college, no income-enhancing degree and significant college loan debt.

What organization in America could -- or should -- survive when it manages to award degrees to only six in 10 Americans? How many equity firms would fund a transfer start-up model that, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, propels fewer than 30 percent of community college students to a four-year institution, despite the fact that 80 percent of all new community college students intend to earn a four-year degree?

Action for Greater Degree Completion

Fortunately, there are solutions that will raise degree completion rates for all Americans -- and lower the cost per degree. As the Biden administration works to foster a more college-educated population, we should (as our book title suggests) go [Beyond Free College](#) ^[4].

This is the moment for our country to build upon the broad backing for free college while also providing the additional supports that advance students toward the completion of degrees and certificates.

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Investing in strategies that boost degree completion and lower the cost per degree is likely to gain bipartisan support because the U.S. enjoyed success in this arena during the last century. The GI Bill provided returning World War II veterans with the support they needed to be reskilled for a peacetime economy. Just like the free college proposal put forth by President Biden, the GI Bill covered the cost of tuition. But there were important additions. The GI Bill also provided students with critical funding support that covered the expenses of housing, food, books and childcare. We need similar support today to assure the students who enroll actually get what they came for and graduate with a college degree.

The successful return on investment for the GI Bill to our country has been well documented, as have similar replicable models such as the [ASAP program](#) ^[5] found across the CUNY system in New York City. Although covering these up-front costs requires significant investments, the cost per degree is reduced because the degree completion rate rises dramatically. And the return on investment rises because Americans with postsecondary degrees and certificates pay higher taxes and have less dependence on social services funded by the American taxpayer. [Studies demonstrate](#) ^[6] this ROI as being in the range of four to one to five to one, a rate of return that should speak compellingly across the political aisle. It's notable that this rate of return doesn't even begin to compute the benefits to subsequent generations, because the children of college graduates are much more likely to also complete a postsecondary certificate or degree.

With COVID, we are now emerging from another kind of war that has laid bare the discontinuities and inequities of higher education. Sustaining a post-pandemic economy and reducing Gilded Age-like discrepancies in average income among Americans can only be addressed through postsecondary training and education. It is also likely to help knit together a political divide that higher education must address, regardless of who is the White House.

Section:

[Student Voice](#) ^[7]

Author Bio:

Stephen J. Handel is a senior strategist for strategic higher education assessment use and opportunity at the College Board. Eileen L. Stempel is the inaugural dean of the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music.

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Links

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/07/20/what-college-students-think-about-higher-education-policy>

[2] <https://joebiden.com/build-back-better/>

[3] <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/news/2021/04/06/497888/building-college-educated-america-requires-closing-racial-gaps-attainment/>

[4] <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475848649/Beyond-Free-College-Making-Higher-Education-Work-for-21st-Century-Students>

[5] <https://www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap/>

[6] <https://www.mdrc.org/project/evaluation-accelerated-study-associate-programs-asap-developmental-education-students#overview>

[7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/student-voice>