

GUEST ESSAY

Should Two- and Four-Year Degrees Be Free?

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The last 40 years have seen an ever-widening income gap between those with college degrees and those without. Over that interval, incomes have soared for those with advanced degrees and declined for those with high-school diplomas or less. As a result, the route to economic security for young people depends increasingly on access to higher education. Yet it keeps getting more expensive.

Since the Great Recession, the public portion of the operating costs for state universities and colleges in Connecticut, where we teach, has declined 20 percent; since the 1980s, it has declined by nearly half. In the 1960s, tuition for a Connecticut state university was \$100 a year, which could be earned by working fewer than 100 hours at minimum wage. Today, a student needs to work nearly 1,000 hours at the state minimum of \$12 an hour to pay the \$11,462 required for tuition at the least expensive state university in Connecticut.

Our state is hardly unique in abdicating its responsibilities to the next generation. By 2018, only four states had returned to prerecession funding levels at public two- and four-year institutions. In Arizona the decline has been especially acute: 2018 per-student higher-education funding was down 55.7 percent from 2008, and average student tuition costs at four-year institutions increased by 91 percent. In Louisiana, these figures were 40.6 and 105.4 percent, respectively.

The Biden administration has proposed reforms to ease the student-debt crisis. But a real solution must upend a system of cascading inequities. Restoring the dream of higher education as an equalizer requires a holistic solution that attacks all the sources of the problem: a lack of investment in common goods, growing tuition and student debt and exploitative labor practices that undermine the quality of education.

The rise in tuition costs, combined with the growing economic value of a college degree, fuels the crisis of student debt, which today totals \$1.7 trillion. To pay for a year of school, three-quarters of American families pay at least 24 percent of their average family income, even after grants are distributed.

As students pay more, they often receive less. Nationwide, nearly 75 percent of all faculty positions are off the tenure track, often without benefits or long-term job prospects. Ironically, hundreds of thousands of some of the most educated people in the country now shuttle to and from campus, juggling gigs to try to eke out a living while unable to give students the attention they deserve.

While President Biden's American Families Plan includes a provision for free community college, this is an incomplete solution.

The College for All Act of 2021, introduced by Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Pramila Jayapal, would address the crisis in full. In addition to making community college tuition-free for all, it would make two- and four-year public colleges and minority-serving institutions free for poor and middle-class students and increase funding for programs that target students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Nationally, in 2016, the net average price of college attendance (the total cost minus all grants awarded) for students coming from the lowest family income quartile amounted to 94 percent of total family income. Unsurprisingly, poorer students are less present at higher levels of education nationwide. In Connecticut, students of color are overrepresented at the introductory levels and increasingly underrepresented at higher levels.

We stand to exacerbate racial and class divides if we create a dead end for poorer students by cutting off funding at the associate level, stunting their progress or requiring them to take on debt to continue. By including both two- and four-year institutions and by expanding Pell grants so they can be used to cover living and nontuition expenses, the College for All Act would help bridge the significant earning gap between those with some college education and those with bachelor's degrees.

The measure would also address the labor precarity corroding learning conditions: It would require that at least 75 percent of courses be taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty members and help transition short-term and part-time faculty members to those positions.

To fund these reforms, the bill proposes a tax on trades of stocks, bonds and derivatives, to raise more than \$600 billion over the next decade.

The College for All Act complements recent efforts in states like California, Connecticut, Georgia and New York to boost two- and four-year institutions. While these efforts are distinct, they all seek to facilitate the movement between two-year colleges and public universities and improve equity.

In "The Inequality Machine," Paul Tough demonstrates how the financing structure of higher education fails to level the playing field. Rather, it amplifies the inherited advantages and disadvantages that were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. He documents what we have too often witnessed: Bright, able and gritty students simply cannot overcome the financial and other obstacles that prevent them from completing their degrees.

To the extent that higher education reinforces existing inequities, it contributes to the affliction it is supposed to ease. Solving this problem will expand opportunities for individuals, grow the middle class, improve the skills of America's work force and strengthen democracy. But this won't happen on its own; it needs a push. So let's push.

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