

# Redefining **Value** and Promoting **Economic Mobility**

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Colleagues—

What is college worth?

The [Postsecondary Value Commission](#) recently released its final [report](#) and [action agenda](#), which caps two years of work to provide new answers to that question.

For us at the foundation, this is more than just the release of a report. It represents an important step forward in transforming our higher education system to make it more student-centered and deliver on the promise of equitable opportunity. And that opportunity has to include equitable value—value for students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, income, or gender.

The commission’s findings underscore that while many colleges and universities see upward economic mobility for their students and graduates, too many do not. And what’s even more disheartening: students who complete the same degree see vastly different economic outcomes according to their race or ethnicity.

This should not be the case in 2021.

That is why the commission is proposing an action agenda, one that will not fix every problem, but one that will put more students—especially Black, Latino, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American/Pacific Islander students and students from low-income backgrounds—on the path to a credential that leads to a better living and a better life.

The foundation will pick up where the commission leaves off by supporting colleges and universities and partners committed to gathering and using better data about the value of education after high school—and more importantly—taking action to improve value and make it more equitable.

We are pleased to support *Inside Higher Ed* in its coverage of postsecondary value from different angles. I hope that you will ask tough questions about value as you read this diverse collection of news and views—and take those questions back to your jobs serving today’s students. Because at the end of the day, improving value and making it more equitable is really on all of us.

Regards,

Patrick Methvin  
Director of Education, Postsecondary  
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

# Introduction

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This month the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation released a 115-page report calling for more information to help students make better choices about where to go to college, eliminating “completion gaps,” and “removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value.” Underlying the report’s recommendations is the belief that profound inequalities of race, ethnicity and gender are holding back higher education from fulfilling its potential role in advancing American society and making it more equitable.

The articles in this compilation explore the report and the underlying issues it raises. Some colleges – even before the report’s release – were working on the issues raised in the study. And essays examine both the report and related issues.

*Inside Higher Ed* will continue to cover these issues. We welcome your reactions to this compilation and your ideas for future coverage.

**–The Editors**

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ensure everyone  
in the United States  
can learn, grow, and  
get ahead, regardless  
of race, gender,  
ethnicity, or family  
income.

## Redefining 'Value' in Higher Education

Gates Foundation issues report calling for a new definition of value, and for clear ways for students to identify it. The emphasis is on promoting economic mobility for all.

By **Scott Jaschik** // May 12, 2021



CAL STATE LONG BEACH

When the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation [created the Postsecondary Value Commission](#) two years ago, the foundation's leaders were thinking about ways to measure economic outcomes for students earning certificates and degrees – outcomes that could include postcollegiate earnings and the ability to repay debt, earnings premiums for degree earners or certificate earners, and economic mobility after college.

[The 115-page report](#) being released today is consistent with those goals. It calls for the release of more information to help students make better choices about where to go to college, eliminating “completion gaps” and “removing affordability as an impediment

to postsecondary value.” (*Inside Higher Ed* received financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for coverage of the foundation's report on the value of higher education. *Inside Higher Ed* maintains editorial independence and full control over the content.)

But much has changed in the past two years, and the report also reflects current socioeconomic realities, including the murder of George Floyd and the inequalities of COVID-19.

“Our country has witnessed the murders of countless Black men and women at the hands of police alongside COVID-19's startling death tolls and economic and social upheaval, including the rise in

anti-Asian hate crimes,” the first paragraph of the report says. “The COVID-19 pandemic's impact has been borne disproportionately by Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) populations, while women – especially women of color – have overwhelmingly shouldered the weight of the economic crisis and shifting childcare responsibilities – bringing to the forefront the insidious ways that racism, classism, and sexism continue to play out in American society.”

The report reflects those changes by putting racial and gender equality front and center in the “why” of issuing the findings.

“Without explicit attention to racial,

## Redefining 'Value' in Higher Education (cont.)

socioeconomic, and gender equity, postsecondary education will continue to sustain and exacerbate inequalities, but a more equitable postsecondary education system can build a more just society," it says. "We urgently need to transform the nation's postsecondary system to ensure value for the very populations most impacted by racial and gender violence and the coronavirus pandemic and the dire economic – and life-or-death – consequences they impart to marginalized communities."

Specifically, the report makes the case for its agenda by noting the gaps between white and (some) Asian groups and other minority groups on college completion rates, retention rates and income later in life.

The report addresses three main areas: "a definition of postsecondary value," "the clear value-add that postsecondary education can provide to students and society, in both economic and non-economic terms," and "an action agenda [that] outlines policies and practices that institutional leaders and federal and state policymakers should implement to address systemic barriers that prevent Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women from reaping equitable returns from postsecondary education and achieving economic and social mobility."

Together the three parts are "designed to catalyze an equitable value movement, which will help reshape the higher education system in the United States by com-

bating access and completion barriers, sparking economic mobility, dismantling racist practices and structural inequalities, and building a more vibrant and just society."

Mildred García, co-chair of the Postsecondary Value Commission and president and CEO of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, said addressing such inequities in higher education is the best approach for combating and ending generational poverty.

"This is the new majority of America, and if we don't educate the new majority – the first generation, students of color and/or the low income – the effect will be not only on the students and the families of these students for generations to come but also to the communities, states, nations and our democracy," she said. "We know that today

and into the future the new careers and employment require postsecondary education."

Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the California Community Colleges and a member of the commission, said the group's work was "about giving college and university leaders important information to make tough and necessary decisions." And he said the commission's report was focused on institutions that most students attend. He noted that community colleges educate "the top 100 percent of Americans," while hypercompetitive private colleges educate "the top 1 percent."

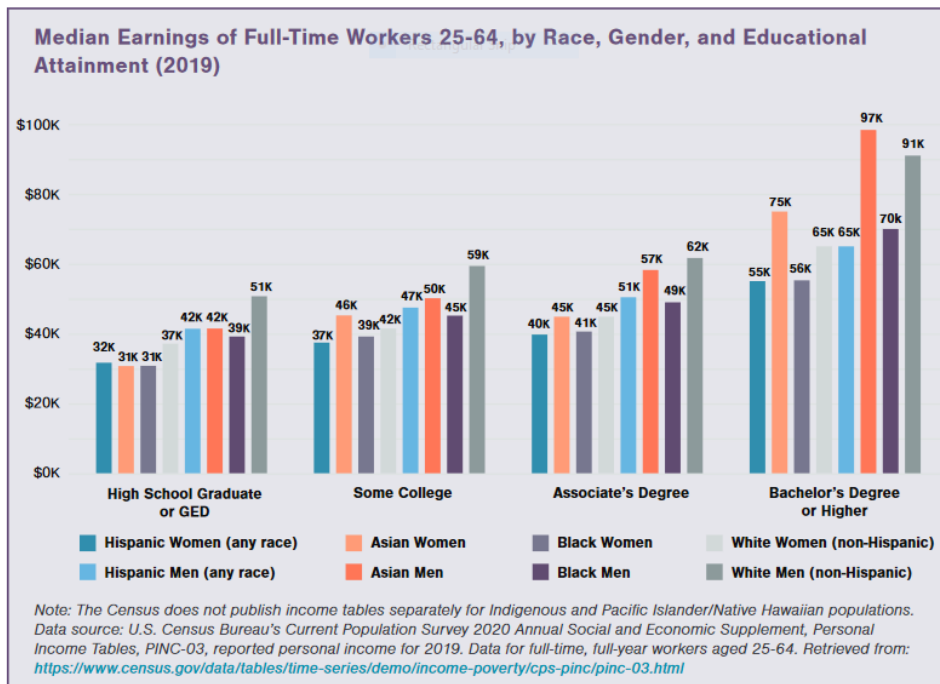
The institutions that are educating the most people "provide the greatest value," he said.

### The Numbers and the Challenges

The report – written by the Institute for Higher Education Policy

Group	Public 4-Year	Public 2-Year	Private Not-For-Profit 4-Year	For-Profit	Total
	<b>Enrollment<sup>1</sup></b>				
Black	30%	39%	14%	17%	100%
Latinx	31%	46%	11%	12%	100%
American Indian or Alaska Native*	33%	52%	6%	9%	100%
AAPI	40%	38%	16%	6%	100%
White	37%	37%	18%	8%	100%
Women	34%	39%	16%	11%	100%
Low-Income/Pell	35%	34%	15%	16%	100%
Total	35%	39%	15%	10%	100%
	<b>Completion<sup>2</sup></b>				
Black	41%	13%	50%	11%	23%
Latinx	50%	17%	71%	12%	24%
American Indian or Alaska Native*	27%	-	-	-	15%
AAPI	66%	21%	85%	-	53%
White	65%	19%	78%	14%	43%
Women	63%	18%	76%	12%	39%
Low-Income/Pell	47%	18%	59%	13%	26%
Total	59%	18%	74%	13%	37%
	<b>Loan Default<sup>3</sup></b>				
Black	38%	41%	43%	66%	49%
Latinx	25%	22%	28%	54%	35%
American Indian or Alaska Native*	-	-	-	-	40%
AAPI	-	-	-	-	11%
White	14%	23%	11%	45%	20%
Women	16%	26%	15%	53%	27%
Low-Income/Pell	27%	29%	26%	56%	35%
Total	18%	26%	17%	53%	28%

## Redefining 'Value' in Higher Education (cont.)



and the Gates Foundation – makes its case with a series of tables. For instance, this table on enrollment shows that Black and Latinx students are far more likely to enroll in public than private (nonprofit or for-profit) institutions. Those who enroll in a private, nonprofit college are more likely to graduate, but their numbers are relatively small. And their student loan default rates are higher in private than in public higher education.

“Disparate attainment outcomes are the result of high prices, inadequate support for completion, and racial and socioeconomic stratification across and within colleges,” the report says. “While incomes continue to lag behind for Black, Latinx, and low-income families compared with their white and wealthier peers, the full price (adjusted for inflation) of postsecondary education has increased by more than 170 percent over the last 40 years. Today, students from

low-income backgrounds must find a way to finance an amount equivalent to 157 percent of their family's annual income to pay for one year at a four-year college. Meanwhile high-income families can send a student to college for a much more manageable 14 percent of their family's annual income.”

The report adds, “Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds are also less likely to have access to the supports necessary to complete a credential, the well-resourced institutions that provide greater chances of completion, or the programs that provide strong economic returns – returns often necessary to repay educational debt and build wealth. For instance, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are concentrated in for-profit institutions and underfunded two-year colleges

that offer lower chances of completion, as well as certificate and associate's degree programs that can offer an immediate return on investment, but provide lower average lifetime earnings and less opportunity for economic mobility than do bachelor's degree programs on average.”

Economic mobility is a key theme. The report argues that going to college matters hugely for one's economic well-being, but race also matters significantly.

Commenting on the above data, the report says, “Furthermore, far too many Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds leave college with debt, but no degree. This system-wide failure leaves these students unable to earn enough in the labor market to repay their loans or recoup their initial investment in postsecondary education, placing them at risk for the worst borrowing outcome: default. Indeed, more than half (55 percent) of Black borrowers who start college but do not complete enter default, inflicting serious financial consequences including damage to credit scores, wage garnishments, collection fees, and Social Security and tax refund withholdings.”

The report also notes, however, that “Black households headed by a college degree holder still have substantially less wealth than White families headed by a high school dropout.”

To further emphasize earnings, the report relies on [University of Texas](#)

# Redefining 'Value' in Higher Education (cont.)

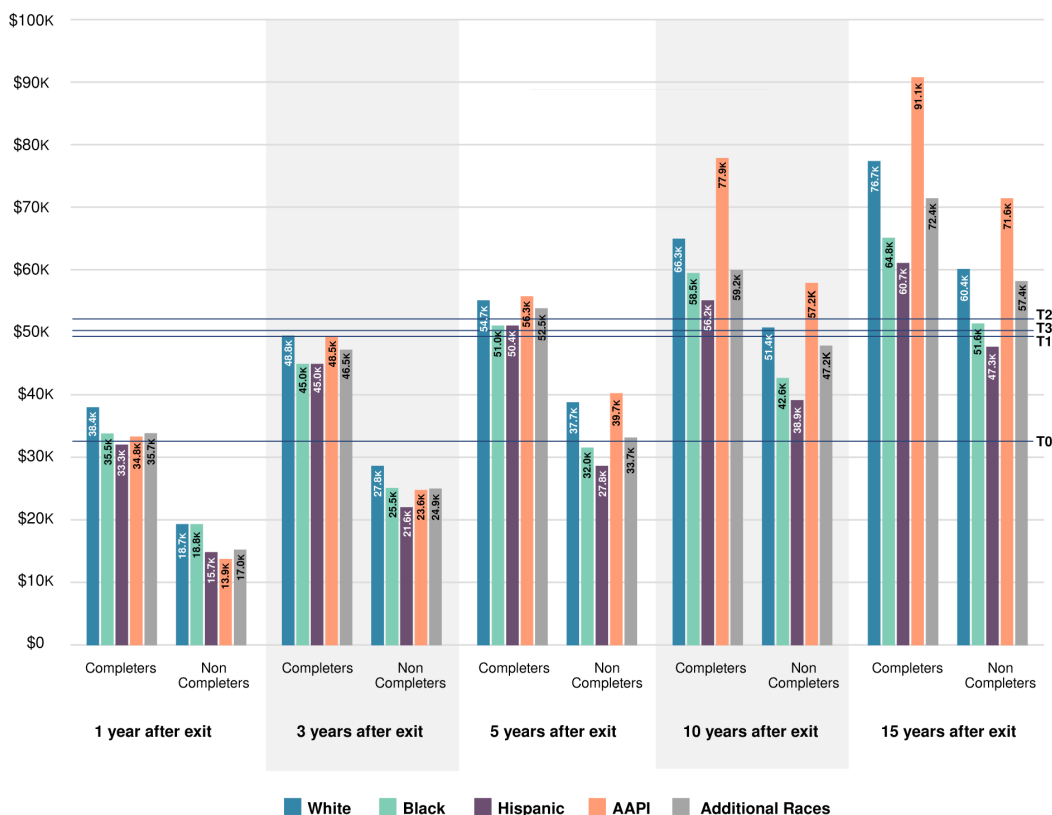
system data. The university system gives current and prospective students a wealth of information about how recent graduates like them have fared in the job market. The website links to records from the Texas Workforce Commission to track 68,000 alumni of the system's 15 universities into the workforce, providing earnings and loan debt levels one year and five years after graduation by institution and major. (A major problem is that the data are less valuable for the University of Texas at Austin because so many alumni work out of state.)

The Texas data are program-level data, not institution data. So people can see the impact of earning a degree in a certain field. But over all, readers of the report can see numerous things about Texas system graduates:

“Over time it becomes apparent that completion matters immensely for the economic outcomes of Black and Latinx students,” the report says. “Relative to their non-completer peers, Black and Latinx UT System completers realize substantial premiums for their degree. Five years after graduation, the median Latinx completer earns \$50,421, which is 81 percent more than their Latinx peers without a degree; median earnings are \$51,068 (a 59 percent premium) for Black completers. In contrast, White students receive a lower (45 percent) premium for completion likely due to higher wages for White high school graduates. Ten years after graduation, UT System graduates from low-income backgrounds also experience larger earnings premiums from completing, compared with their higher-in-

come peers (42 percent compared with 30 percent). As a result, the relative net gain in earnings can be substantially higher for completers from underrepresented groups.”

The report adds that “in some fields, completion can mean the difference between small earnings gaps and massive earnings canyons. For instance, among health majors, Black completers consistently have higher median earnings than their White peers (from 1 year after completion to 15 years after completion), and Latinx completers close a \$10,000 gap at year 1 to less than \$3,000 by year 15. In contrast, among non-completers, Black students face a \$4,000 deficit at year 1, which grows to a \$14,000 deficit by year 15. Latinx non-completers face a gap of nearly \$15,000 at year 1, which grows to approximately \$23,800 by year 5.”



UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS DATA

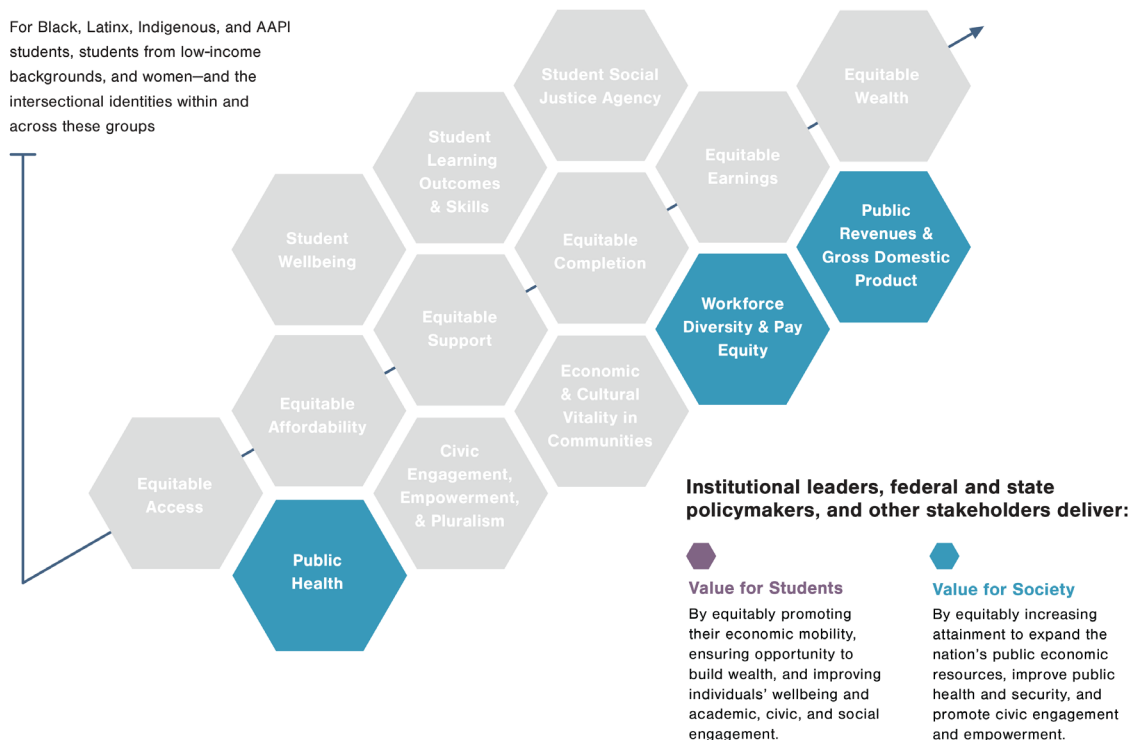


# Redefining 'Value' in Higher Education (cont.)

## The Postsecondary Value Framework

### Pipeline to Equitable Value

For Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women—and the intersectional identities within and across these groups



The Gates report criticizes the extremely selective colleges (on admissions) and suggests that they not receive praise for admitting brilliant students who then go on to do good work.

“The most selective institutions typically have massive pools of privileged white and wealthy students seeking entry. These students often have had access to expensive test preparation and college counseling services, as well as advanced level coursework during high school. They also have access to extensive social networks that facilitate career opportunities during and after college. Therefore, it is unsurprising that institutional selectivity and average SAT scores have moderately strong correlations with institutional median earnings,” the report says. “However, these indicators are also

highly correlated with socioeconomic and racial inequity. Black and Latinx students are disproportionately funneled into high schools without advanced coursework programs like Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate; or, if their school has these programs, they often are tracked away from them. Similarly, standardized test scores are correlated with socioeconomic status. Putting these factors together clarifies the ties between selectivity and institutional diversity.”

The report says a more fair way to judge value is to look at who benefits and who gains – and here the answer is both the students and society. In fact, the report is called “Equitable Value: Promoting Economic Mobility and Social Justice Through Postsecondary Education.”

Based on all these factors, the commission says value is what students experience in higher education.

“Students experience postsecondary value when provided equitable access and support to complete quality, affordable credentials that offer economic mobility and prepare them to advance racial and economic justice in our society,” the report says.

### Next Steps

The commission – armed with 600 pages of research reports – also discusses what colleges should do to address and dismantle all these structural barriers.

“The first phase of the societal economic benefits analysis shows clearly that investments in post-

## Redefining 'Value' in Higher Education (cont.)

secondary equity – on the parts of institutions, states, and the federal government – would pay off and narrow earnings and wealth gaps for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI communities as well as people from low-income backgrounds, and achieving more equitable representation within higher paying fields would make a difference for women. The second phase demonstrates that higher education cannot eliminate the societal inequities that contribute to these persistent gaps by only addressing attainment and affordability. Racism, labor market discrimination, and unequal access to wealth building strategies – particularly through intergenerational wealth transfers – shape the economic benefits that individuals and society can accrue from postsecondary education.”

But while the report says colleges didn't cause the problems in American society, it doesn't let them off the hook.

“However, institutions should not shy away from reshaping policies and practices within their control to help dismantle structural inequalities. Colleges and universities can direct their efforts toward more equitable access, affordability, and completion for students of col-

or and students from low-income backgrounds. They can make sure that students – especially students from low-income backgrounds – are not burdened with educational debt. And they can streamline pathways to careers for marginalized students, especially people of color and women, who face labor market discrimination. As the commission's underlying research shows, combating the inequities that plague our current postsecondary system – and society at large – can lead to enormous local and societal benefits.”

The report outlines the “action agenda” for higher education:

- Equalize access to increase postsecondary value.
- Remove affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value.
- Eliminate completion gaps and strengthen postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value.
- Improve data to expose and address inequitable postsecondary value.
- Promote social justice by providing equitable postsecondary value.

The question is whether higher ed-

ucation will embrace or fight the ideas in the report.

Commission members pointed to research they released today showing that **billions of dollars would be gained** by solving the problems identified in the report.

Pursuing the action agenda will not be easy. For example, commissioners said the University of Texas data should be part of a national database. But the private college lobbying group the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities has opposed the collection of data, citing privacy concerns, among others.

Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education and a member of the commission, called the Gates report “an eloquent statement on the value of higher education.”

He acknowledged that, in the past, some private colleges have opposed measures that would create any national database on student performance. But, he said, “we've all come a long ways.” He noted the hard work of colleges on cybersecurity and the work of College Scorecard should make it easier to support the changes. “Those things open the doors.” ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/12/gates-foundation-attempts-redefine-value-higher-education>

The value of a  
postsecondary  
education is about  
a better life for  
individuals, families,  
and communities.

# The Cost of Doing Nothing

Georgetown University researchers estimate in a new report that the United States loses billions of dollars annually because of inequities in higher education.

By **Sara Weissman** // May 12, 2021

The United States loses out on hundreds of billions of dollars each year because of racial and socioeconomic inequities in higher education attainment, according to a [new report](#) by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

The report, conducted in partnership with the Postsecondary Value Commission, an initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and managed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, found that it would take \$3.97 trillion to close racial and socioeconomic gaps in college degree completion in the country. But after that initial investment, the United States would gain \$956 billion per year in increased in tax revenues and GDP and cost savings on social assistance programs. (*Inside Higher Ed* received financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for coverage of the foundation's report on the value of higher education. *Inside Higher Ed* maintains editorial independence and full control over the content.)

"We really do make the case in this report that an investment in equity would be a really good investment that would pay off for society at large," said co-author Kathryn Peltier Campbell, senior editor and writer at Georgetown CEW, who contributed an [opinion piece on the subject](#)



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Among Americans with earnings in the top 60 percent, 57 percent have an associate degree or higher, compared to only 28 percent of earners in the bottom 40 percent, the report says. Only 21 percent of Latinx adults and 31 percent of Black adults have a postsecondary degree, compared to 46 percent of white adults.

The report examines what could happen if the bottom 40 percent of earners got college degrees at the same rate as the top 60 percent and if higher education attainment rates were the same across racial groups. According to the analysis, over half the population, 58 percent,

would have a postsecondary degree in that scenario, including an additional 12.9 million low-income white Americans, 10.2 million Latinx Americans, 5.9 million Black Americans and 498,000 Asian Americans.

As a result, the United States would collect \$308 billion more in tax revenue per year, the report suggested. People earning more would spend more and provide an estimated \$542 billion annual boost to the country's GDP. The authors also argue that, in addition to better wages, higher education correlates with lower incarceration rates and better health outcomes, leading to less annual spending on the criminal justice system (-\$13.8 billion),

## The Cost of Doing Nothing (cont.)

public health benefits (-\$58.7 billion) and public assistance programs, such as food stamps (-\$33.7 billion).

Artem Gulish, co-author of the report and senior policy strategist at Georgetown CEW, said he recognizes the figures in the report are controversial because the numbers rest on a set of assumptions about what higher education can accomplish. The report also assumes there will be enough demand in the labor market for an upswing in college graduates.

"It's a thought experiment," Gulish said. "It's not about the precise numbers. It's more about the message that our country is missing out on substantial benefits because of the perpetuated inequalities we have in higher education and in K-12 and in the labor market." He called the report "optimistic" and said it was intended to be "inspirational."

The report acknowledges that higher education can only solve so much. For example, higher degree-attainment rates can't rectify other challenges to more equitable wages, such as discriminatory pay gaps. This was a key takeaway of the report, said Stella Flores, associate professor of higher education at New York University and

director of access and equity at the university's higher education policy institute.

"Even if education was perfect, that on its own is not enough to significantly close the gap in racial equity because of issues of wealth, inheritance and the history of excluding various populations from ever garnering any wealth," Flores said.

Nonetheless, the estimated billions in gains outlined in the report seemed realistic to Gary Hoover, professor of economics and executive director of the Murphy Institute, which focuses on social economics, ethics and public policy at Tulane University.

"OK, let's take off a half a billion here, let's put on a half a billion there, does it really matter?" said Hoover, who is also the founding and current editor of the *Journal of Economics, Race and Policy*. "It's enough to where that's a sizable sum that we're leaving on the table. We as economists know it's wasteful to leave money on the table, and this kind of inequality is doing precisely that."

He said the function of such research is to convince higher earners that it's also in their interest to fix gaps in education attainment.

"Here's what I think people at the

top of the income distribution fear: they fear that if you help people at the bottom, then my share of the pie will be smaller," he said. "But what they fail to realize is, what if the pie is actually bigger? A smaller slice of a bigger pie might actually make you better off than a bigger slice of a smaller pie."

Hoover worries, however, that no amount of research on economic inequality has yet created the political will for such a sizable and long-term investment from lawmakers. The CEW report estimates that it would take not only trillions of dollars but at least 34 years to close attainment gaps in higher education and then at least another 17 years for the cumulative gains to outpace the initial costs.

Gulish said the fact that the analysis is a "long-term forecast" shouldn't discourage smaller, more immediate policy changes to address mounting student debt, the high cost of college, disparate funding for community colleges and other obstacles to degree completion for underrepresented students.

"The idea is not that we will instantaneously solve inequality," he said. "It should be an impetus to get started on all the changes and all the work that will be necessary to get there." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/12/how-much-do-inequities-higher-education-cost>

# Test-Optional Admissions Yields Benefits

Major study finds that colleges gain Pell Grant recipients, minority students and women.

By **Scott Jaschik** // April 19, 2021

This year, just about every competitive college – and plenty of not-so-competitive ones – went test optional (or test blind) in admissions. The push was the result of the pandemic, of course, and many of the newly test-optional colleges are leaving open the possibility that they will stay test optional. They will just need research, they say, on the impact of their decisions.

As it happens, last week a paper on the topic was published in the *American Educational Research Journal*. The paper, by Christopher T. Bennett, examined the impact of test-optional admissions on nearly 100 private colleges that adopted their policies between 2005-06 and 2015-16.

The findings associated test-optional policies with:

- A 3-4 percent increase in Pell Grant recipients enrolled.
- A 10-12 percent increase in first-time students from under-represented racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- A 6-8 percent increase in first-time enrollment of women.

Past studies have revealed similar findings (although the finding on women is new), but the study's release comes at a time when many colleges are anxious for such re-

search. Bennett, who is finishing his doctoral degree at Vanderbilt University, did not receive any outside funding for the work.

Bennett said in an interview that he saw one difference between the colleges he studied and the colleges that have just admitted their first class of test-optional students: the time they prepared for the change.

Most colleges in the past that have switched to test optional have devoted years to the process, and they have planned carefully. That can't be said about all the colleges that switched in the last year.

Test optional "is a step in the right direction," he said. But if diversity is the goal, "they need a broader plan."

"People usually focus on what's no longer there – the test scores," he said. But colleges need to look at everything involved in admissions and ask what serves a real purpose and what doesn't.

He also pointed to the impact of going test optional on women's enrollment.

**Worcester Polytechnic Institute** went test optional and experienced a surge – 99 percent in applications and enrollments increased by 81 percent – in women. Bennett said his study included some STEM-ori-



MICHAEL QUIRK/GETTY IMAGES

ented colleges like WPI but many that were not STEM oriented, and they still had more women applying, being admitted and enrolling.

Robert Schaeffer, executive director of FairTest: the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, which opposes standardized testing, said via email that Bennett's study provides "statistical evidence that adopting ACT/SAT optional policies typically results in more applicants, better qualified applicants, and more diverse applicants of all sorts. His conclusions also coincide with the admissions data recently reported by many schools that suspended standardized exam requirements in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic."

He added, "No one has ever claimed that test-optional policies are a 'magic bullet' that will instantaneously resolve all the problems of college admissions. But, particularly when combined with other initiatives to remove barriers to access, dropping ACT/SAT requirements is a proven way to enhance equity in undergraduate admissions."

## Test-Optional Admissions Yields Benefits (cont.)

ACT released a statement on the study. “Eliminating standardized testing does not address the systemic issues at the root of educational inequities in our education system. This research right-sizes expectations about test optional. Modest gains might occur, though major gains are unlikely,” the statement said. “Since more data is always better, we welcome ongoing research to examine test optional practices in the post-COVID world. We’re united with advocates and critics alike in seeking to understand how test optional practices affect student success outcomes.” ■

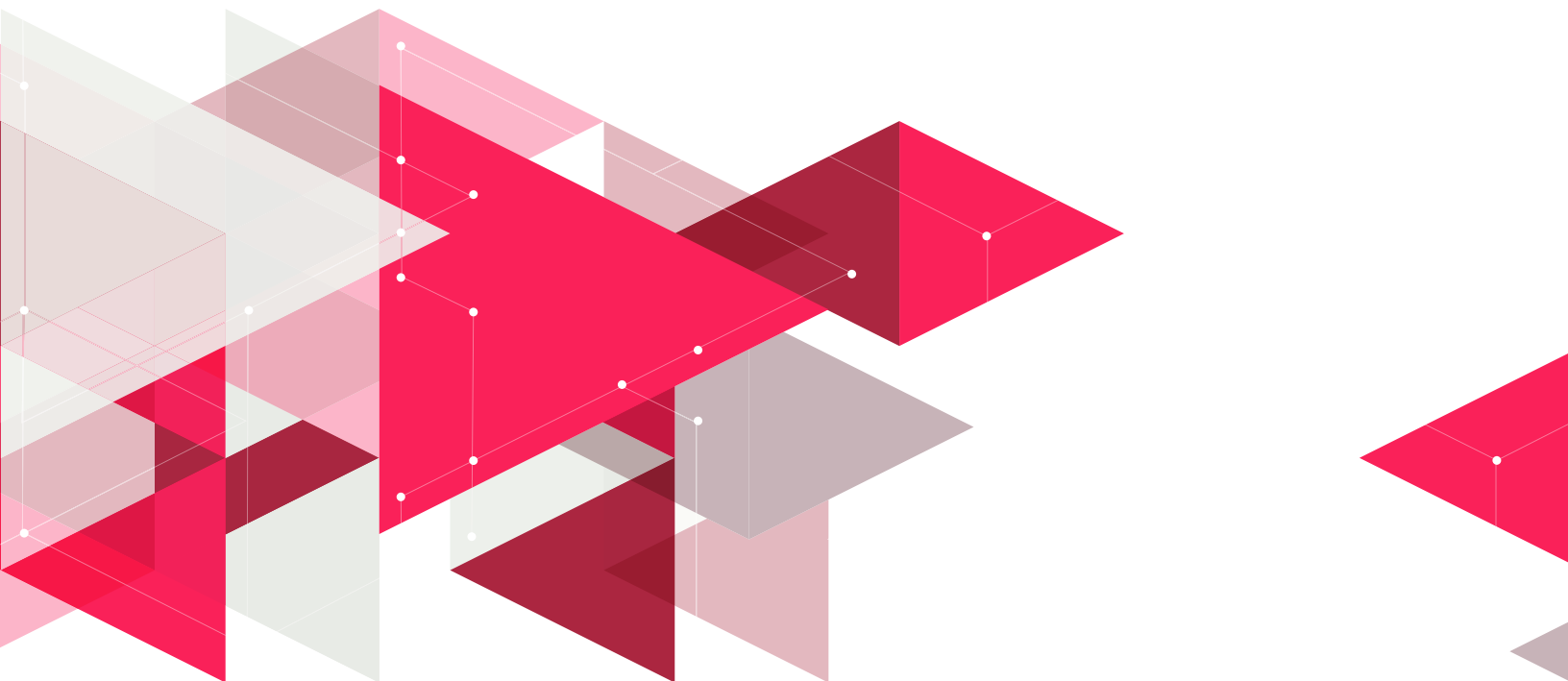
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<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2021/04/19/test-optional-colleges-get-more-pell-grant-students-minority-students>



## Free College Offer Lures Thousands

State officials in Michigan expected a big response when they launched a free college program for adults earlier this year. They got lots of takers, all right – 67,000 and counting.

By **Sara Weissman** // May 5, 2021

Johnathon Young thought about going to college on and off over the years, but money was always a factor.

Laying down tiles and floorboards for a living meant paying tuition would be stretch. The work also took a physical toll on him.

“It’s really tough on the body,” Young said.

He was ready for a long-term career change when his wife saw an online ad touting a program to enroll in community college for free.

This summer, Young, 36, will be a first-time college student, commitments of a state program designed for adults like him who’ve never attended or completed college.

The Michigan Reconnect program, launched in February by the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, allows state residents age 25 and older to attend local community colleges tuition-free, as long as they have a high school diploma or equivalent and didn’t already graduate from college.

It took Young an hour to fill out the application, and a few days later he was accepted to Henry Ford College in Dearborn, a mile from his house.

Young’s reaction was, “OK, it would



JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

**Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer speaks in Southfield, Mich.**

be pretty dumb not to do this.”

He isn’t alone. State labor department officials expected demand to be high when they developed the Reconnect program. They estimated they would get 60,000 applicants by Memorial Day, but more than 67,000 people have applied so far, and more applications are coming in every day.

“The word ‘free’ is a pretty powerful motivating concept,” said Michael Hansen, president of the Michigan Community College Association. “And while obviously it’s not completely free, it’s tuition-free,” he said referring to the total cost of college, including expenses such

as textbooks, transportation and other costs.

The program requires all students to apply for federal financial aid in order to participate in the last-dollar program, which means the state will pay the remainder of tuition costs not covered by federal grants. Once accepted, students have four years to earn their degrees. The program also includes the Michigan Skills Scholarship, which offers students up to \$1,500 toward tuition at a trade school or program.

Young, the flooring installer, is among the 16 percent of applicants attending college for the first



## Free College Offer Lures Thousands (cont.)

time. Just over 50 percent of the applicants are returning to college, and about 33 percent of applicants were already enrolled and will have the remainder of their tuition covered.

The program is a part of Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer's goal to have 60 percent of the state's residents earn a skill certificate or college degree by 2030.

Michigan Reconnect offers a clear benefit to adult learners, but the push is also driven by local labor market demands, said Susan Corbin, acting director of the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. She estimates that there are about 4.1 million people age 25 and older in the state without a college degree.

"In Michigan, we're just not competitive in the region," Corbin said. "We're not competitive with states around us because we need a more talented workforce. We hear from so many local employers that they have jobs going unfilled because they don't have people with the right skills. That absolutely is the impetus for the program. We are looking at where there are in-demand jobs, where there are jobs going unfilled and where do we think there will be jobs in the future."

The Michigan Reconnect program website [provides data](#) and other information about jobs that are most in demand in the state, including a breakdown by geographical area so students can see the most common job openings near where they live and the average pay. For example, around Wayne County, where Henry Ford College is located, there

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The word 'free' is a pretty powerful motivating concept.... And while obviously it's not completely free, it's tuition-free.

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are 1,055 annual openings for automotive service technicians and mechanics and 833 annual openings for computer user support specialists.

The program also offers a glimmer of hope for community college budgets strained by the pandemic and economic downturn, which made it harder to retain students struggling with online learning and to recruit new students who may have lost jobs or were struggling financially.

Community colleges across the country [underwent staggering enrollment drops](#) this academic year, an 11.3 percent decrease on average nationally this spring compared to spring 2020, according to the latest National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data. Michigan was no exception. Enrollment for community colleges in the state [fell by 13.2 percent](#) in fall 2020 from the previous fall.

The state's Reconnect program is "bandaging the wound" to community colleges, said Ryan Fewins-Bliss, executive director of the

Michigan College Access Network, an advocacy organization for higher education access in the state.

"When you're looking at a 10 percent cut in your student base, that can be existential for a school," he said. "This might be a way to help get them through this pandemic."

Enrollment at Kellogg Community College in southern Michigan dropped about 15 percent in the fall compared to fall 2019. College officials made it a priority to make sure applicants actually completed their federal financial aid forms and enrolled. As a part of that effort, Eric Greene, vice president for strategy, relations and communications, and Nikki Jewell, dean of enrollment services and financial aid, held virtual informational "road shows" on Zoom with local partners such as school districts and childcare programs to raise awareness about Michigan Reconnect. Enrollment administrators at Kellogg project an enrollment increase this upcoming fall.

"We're starting to see some indi-

## Free College Offer Lures Thousands (cont.)

cators that we're starting to claw our way back in terms of regaining some of that loss in enrollment," Greene said.

Michigan community college administrators credit both the Michigan Reconnect program and its predecessor, Futures for Frontliners, which offers a tuition-free education in a degree program at a local community college to essential workers in the state who worked in grocery stores, restaurants, waste management, public transportation and other in-person jobs during the pandemic. Applications for Futures for Frontliners closed on Dec. 31 last year, while the Michigan Reconnect application period is ongoing.

Kalamazoo Valley Community College received almost 4,500 applications for Futures for Frontliners and about 2,500 applications through Michigan Reconnect.

"Anecdotally, every call that comes into the college is about Reconnect," said Alisha Cederberg, associate dean of student experience at Kalamazoo Valley. "There's a big appetite for this in the state of Michigan."

Lori Przymusinski, vice chancellor for student services at Oakland Community College, northwest of Detroit, is excited about the program but is unsure if the influx of adult students will be enough to make up for enrollment losses. While the program may be a "game changer" for students, she worries about those starting or restarting community college careers online as the pandemic continues.

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That absolutely is the impetus for the program. We are looking at where there are in-demand jobs, where there are jobs going unfilled and where do we think there will be jobs in the future.

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"We have students who have never attended college or students who are coming back after a gap of time, and it may not be the most desirable way for them to learn in a virtual environment," she said. "A lot of these students have never taken an online class, so they don't know all the way how to navigate."

That said, Przymusinski and others are confident their institutions are prepared to support the influx of adult students who make up a significant portion of community college students.

Nonetheless, some institutions are undergoing changes to prepare for the wave of new students.

Lake Michigan College in southwestern Michigan, for example, is shifting recruiters who also work with high school students to now focus on the new adult learners.

"It's really about adapting to what's walking in the door," said Jeremy Schaeffer, director of admissions and recruitment at Lake Michigan.

Kellogg Community College is ar-

ranging an "interventions strategies work group" of administrators to prepare for the new students and ensure they understand the intricacies of the program and have the support services they need once enrolled.

The program also requires community colleges to have certain services in place, notably, remedial education courses that don't delay students from earning college credit. The colleges have until Jan. 1, 2022, to reform their developmental education courses.

Oakland Community College was already in the process of developing such courses, Przymusinski said, but meeting that deadline may be a heavier lift for community colleges that haven't started a remedial education reform process.

Hansen, the president of the community college association, said the widespread reform will be a great "side effect or side benefit" of the program.

"If we can really use this to incen-

## Free College Offer Lures Thousands (cont.)

tivize colleges to reform their developmental education practices in a way that's best for students, I think ultimately that's what everybody wants," he said.

The central benefit of the program is that the low price tag is motivating students who might not have considered college, or who even ruled it out as an option, to work toward a degree.

Free tuition "changes behavior and it changes the conversation," Hansen said. "It shows that there are a lot of different barriers for people to complete a postsecondary degree, but if you take some of those barriers away, people are eager and they're ready and they're hungry for this."

The program's advocates are already looking anxiously toward next year and hoping the next state budget will again fund the \$30 million program. The governor proposed continued funding, but the state Legislature has yet to include the program in its budget proposal for the 2022 fiscal year.

"We hope that in the end we'll have money to support this," Hansen

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Anecdotal, every call that comes into the college is about Reconnect. There's a big appetite for this in the state of Michigan.

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said. "Otherwise, this could be a real disaster for students who have now started and are anticipating their money to be there. Presumably, colleges probably don't have the resources themselves to make this up. The program would exist in statute, but if there's no money to support it, the assumption is students wouldn't be able to get their tuition paid for."

Corbin, the labor department director, is confident the funding will continue.

It's early in the budgeting process, and "Michigan Reconnect has such

widespread bipartisan support," she said.

As Young prepares to start his associate's degree program in the summer, he's seeing comments on Facebook disparaging the program, complaining about freeloaders. He finds that line of thinking "silly."

"Everyone wins in this scenario," he said. People are getting an education and access to better jobs. "I get people in debt being mad about paying money. But don't be mad about people trying to make themselves better." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/05/adult-learners-flood-michigan-reconnect-program>

## Harvard Wasn't the Only One With Record Numbers of Applicants

For some historically Black colleges, this is a breakthrough year – despite the long odds created by the pandemic. Morgan State, North Carolina A&T and Spelman are having notable years.

By **Scott Jaschik** // May 10, 2021



MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Check out the [#MSU25](#) hashtag on Twitter and you'll see some of Morgan State University's next class of freshmen. One woman boasts, "After getting accepted into 15+ schools, I have decided to further my education at Morgan State University."

Another says, "Two years ago I was not aware that undocumented students were allowed to achieve a higher education. Thanks to God and my community, today I have decided I will be attending Morgan State University majoring in communications and political science." Many students pose with the "I'm In" banners that the university sent out with its admissions offers this year.

This is of course the admissions class that was most influenced by the pandemic. Students couldn't visit campuses where they wanted to enroll, and many had to decide based on factors other than the campus visit. Many students of all races said in surveys that they wanted to attend colleges close to home (if they didn't get into Harvard University or someplace similar). Black students were influenced by reports of racial tensions at many predominantly white campuses. And many Black students were influenced by finances – questioning how they could afford a higher education.

Tracking the enrollment at historically Black colleges can be difficult.

Many historically Black colleges do not adhere (at all or strictly) to May deadlines for telling the college if a student who has been accepted will enroll. This reflects a reality that the colleges are admitting students who will be just able to afford to attend (with the aid they are given), and for many students and families, the beginning of May is the start of the time to figure out what they can afford.

Nonetheless, some Black colleges are declaring this year to be one of amazing success in admissions.

Chelsea N. Holley, interim director of admissions at Spelman College, said the college received 11,126 applications this year. Last year

## Harvard Wasn't the Only One With Record Numbers of Applicants (cont.)

and the year before, it received only about 9,100 applications. The college aims to enroll roughly 575 students, the same number as last year.

At North Carolina A&T State University, it's "another great year," according to Todd Simmons, the associate vice chancellor.

The college has received 28,488 undergraduate applications, up from 28,426 at this point for 2020 and 26,708 in 2019. In 2017, total applications were 18,645. Simmons expects applications to top 30,000 this year, for the Class of 2025.

North Carolina A&T also has seen a 36 percent increase in freshman intent to enroll (with a 3.8 grade point average). The university does not require a deposit but does require students to pay a deposit for housing.

Simmons predicted this year would be the sixth straight year with record enrollment.

But those increases are nothing like what Morgan State, a historically Black university in Baltimore, has seen. The university received 14,600 undergraduate applications, an all-time high, and a 58.5 percent increase over the total number received in 2019, the last year before the pandemic.

Of those students who were admitted, 1,600 have committed to attend in the fall, compared to fewer than 700 who had committed at this point last year. And nearly 1,200 applicants have submitted applications for housing thus far,

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After getting accepted into 15+ schools, I have decided to further my education at Morgan State University.

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an increase of 54.6 percent over 2019.

Last year, the university enrolled 1,235 freshmen. With 1,600 already committed to attend, and Morgan State still admitting students, Kara Turner, vice president for enrollment management and student success, said she expected more students to enroll this fall than last fall.

"Summer melt is real," she said. But she is "cautiously optimistic" about the numbers.

Asked why so many students are seeking out Morgan State this year, she offered a number of reasons.

"There are a number of things going on, some we can't take any credit for, but others we can." Some of the changes reflect on Morgan State, and others on all Black colleges.

■ HBCUs "are really in the spotlight," she said. In part that's because of Kamala Harris (a Howard University grad) serving as vice president. Or the work on voting led by Stacey Abrams (a

Spelman College grad).

- More students appear to be applying to more colleges.
- Students "want someplace safe, where they will feel supported," Turner said.
- Many Black colleges have [good reputations for handling the pandemic](#).
- Morgan State received extensive publicity for the gifts from the philanthropist [MacKenzie Scott](#) (\$40 million) and from [Calvin E. Tyler Jr.](#), who dropped out of Morgan State in 1963 and took a job as a truck driver because he couldn't afford tuition.
- Morgan State waived the application fee, will accept unofficial transcripts in the admissions process and went test optional for the first time. "We wanted to make it as easy as possible to apply," Turner said.
- Morgan State added marketing efforts and financial aid to attract students.

## Harvard Wasn't the Only One With Record Numbers of Applicants (cont.)

Turner said she couldn't cite a single reason but that it was the cumulative effect of all these things. "Although we were already seeing incremental increases in applications annually and anticipated some additional level of growth due to national trends, what we are seeing in actuality was somewhat unexpected, but this is a good problem to have," she added.

Mason Davies is one of the students who will be enrolling in the fall.

He credited a tour by Don-Terry Veal, vice president for state and federal relations and chief of staff, with his decision to go to Morgan State over Towson University, a predominantly white institution nearby.

"My family and I had the opportunity to tour Morgan's campus," Davies said. "Dr. Veal was a great guide, and I emailed him to let him know that I knew the tour was a

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The tour made all the difference in my college decision. I am super excited to have chosen Morgan State as my academic home.

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very special opportunity. He shared the importance of Morgan students' participation in the 1955 sit-in at Reed's Pharmacy. That story ties into my major, sociology/anthropology, because of its historical aspect and the roles African Americans played during the civil rights movement of the '60s. I

thought North Carolina A&T began the sit-in movements, but Dr. Veal reminded us that Morgan was the first. That was good to know."

He said, "The tour made all the difference in my college decision. I am super excited to have chosen Morgan State as my academic home."■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2021/05/10/some-black-colleges-great-year-admissions>

## An Investment That Would Pay Off for Society

Our failure to enact racial and economic justice in higher education costs the United States close to \$956 billion per year, write Anthony P. Carnevale and Kathryn Peltier Campbell.

By **Anthony P. Carnevale** and **Kathryn Peltier Campbell** // May 12, 2021

Americans have long considered education a universal remedy for what ails us, including social and economic injustice. Even when we have political differences, we often see education as a legitimate mechanism for advancing social mobility because we believe it is the fairest arbiter of economic opportunity. If you make the grades, get the degrees and qualify for the high-paying jobs, you will have earned your way to economic success – or so we may think. Give everyone a fair shot, we may say, and social inequality will sort itself out.

But the truth is we have overrelied on education as a mechanism for advancing equal opportunity and societal well-being. The education system has not been the facilitator of equal opportunity we have imagined. The costs of our misplaced faith have been high not only for individual Americans but also for American society as a whole.

Far from being a lever for equal opportunity, education is at the heart of the American **merit myth**. From early childhood education through graduate school, education is key to the intergenerational transmission of race and class privilege. Its role in dividing the advantaged from the disadvantaged has only grown as the **economic demand** for workers with postsecondary credentials



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has risen and the wage premium associated with having those credentials has increased. That has been especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers with bachelor's and graduate degrees have been **most protected** from the economic fallout that the virus has wrought.

Postsecondary education's role in widening economic gaps is fairly straightforward. It starts with highly educated high-income parents who make sure their children attend the best elementary and secondary schools and have access to the extracurriculars that appeal to admissions officers at elite private and public colleges. Those elite

colleges transmit high status to their students – along with **better chances of graduating** than the average student has at a nonselective institution. Thus, well-to-do parents use the resources associated with their own educational and social attainment to transmit their advantages to their children, while elite educational institutions thrive on the race for prestige by catering to students from families at the highest levels of socioeconomic status. And the cycle continues uninterrupted.

### Imagining a More Just System

So what is the cost to our society of this perpetual cycle of inequali-

## An Investment That Would Pay Off for Society (cont.)

ty, and what would happen if policy makers and educators were able to interrupt the cycle? Working in partnership with the [Postsecondary Value Commission](#) – which has been investigating for several years how colleges and universities can [promote opportunity and equitably increase economic mobility](#) – our research team at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce set out to answer this question.

[What we found](#) is promising news for higher education and for the United States at large – that is, if we can agree that higher education is more than a mechanism for perpetuating inequality, and that it should be working for the collective prosperity of us all.

In the thought experiment we conducted, we asked, what if people in the bottom 40 percent of earners (and those not earning anything) had the same level of educational attainment as those in the top 60 percent? And what if all racial and ethnic groups had at least the same level of postsecondary attainment as white Americans?

The short answer is that the United States would be a very different place. Our economic analyses revealed that the share of people with an associate's degree or higher would increase substantially across all racial and ethnic groups, with more than half of the population earning postsecondary degrees. The number of people with an associate's degree or higher would increase by 12.9 million low-income white adults; 10.2 million Latino adults; 5.9 million

Black adults; 498,000 Asian adults; 462,000 American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AIAN/NHPI) adults; and 457,000 adults of other races and ethnicities.

Because earnings are typically higher for people with higher educational attainment – and there is no compelling reason to think that won't continue to be the case as the economy increasingly demands highly educated workers – we can expect these workers to have higher earnings commensurate with their higher levels of educational attainment.

To be sure, those higher earnings would benefit individuals and their families. But they would also produce substantial benefits to society, including an estimated public monetary gain of \$956 billion each year. Higher educational attainment would also likely yield substantial nonmonetary benefits to society, such as increased critical thinking abilities, stronger civic engagement, lower inclinations toward authoritarianism, a more positive orientation toward American pluralism, better health, boosts in agency and empowerment, and a rise in happiness.

To put it another way: the United States currently loses out on \$956 billion per year – that is, close to \$1 trillion annually – plus a plethora of nonmonetary benefits, all because we have failed to enact racial and economic justice in our higher education system.

The \$956 billion in potential annual monetary gains represents a combination of increased tax revenue

(a \$308 billion boost annually); increased GDP from higher spending (a \$542 billion boost annually); and reduced public spending on programs and services related to public health (an annual savings of \$58.7 billion), criminal justice (an annual savings of \$13.8 billion) and public assistance (an annual savings of \$33.7 billion). Those latter savings would arise from the fact that higher educational attainment is associated with better health, lower crime rates and less need for public assistance.

Those public gains could coincide with substantial personal benefits that would have major implications for the project of building a just and flourishing society. The earnings gaps between different racial and economic groups would begin to close, and so would gaps between those groups' potential to accumulate wealth through higher savings.

To be clear, no transformation of the postsecondary system would be sufficient on its own to close the enormous intergenerational wealth gaps that exist today. On average, nearly half of personal wealth is [transmitted by bequest](#) instead of being acquired through a person's own work or investments. Thus, while postsecondary equity could change individuals' lives, it could not erase the enormous intergenerational wealth gaps that have accumulated over hundreds of years.

The higher levels of educational attainment our experiment describes could not be achieved without substantial spending. An initial investment of at least \$3.97 trillion would be required, plus additional



## An Investment That Would Pay Off for Society (cont.)

long-term costs associated with maintaining higher capacity in the education system. While that is an enormous investment, in the long run, the benefits of attaining equality in educational attainment would undoubtedly surpass the associated costs.

### **The Hard Limits of Educational Equity's Potential Impact**

Our thought experiment demonstrates that an investment in educational equity would pay off for society. To be sure, fixing our broken postsecondary system will be an essential part of any plan to address the deep racial injustice that has plagued our country since its founding, along with the economic disparities that have deepened over the past few decades. But our experiment also showed that there are hard limits to postsecondary equity's possible impact, and those limits don't end with the small potential to affect the country's wealth gaps that we mentioned above.

Even with equitable educational attainment, without additional changes, inequality in the labor market and society would persist. Black, Latino and Indigenous Americans still wouldn't have earnings equal to those of white and Asian Americans – and that's particularly true for Black, Latina and Indigenous women. Women already have higher educational attainment than men today and yet continue to be paid lower wages.

To accomplish equal pay, we would have to extend our work to address inequality beyond schools and colleges, into the labor market and the broader society. We would

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Far from being a lever for equal opportunity, education is at the heart of the American merit myth. From early childhood education through graduate school, education is key to the intergenerational transmission of race and class privilege.

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need more women and Black and Latino workers in the highest-paying fields, like engineering; better child and elder care to ensure that all students can complete their degrees and all workers have the time and resources to thrive at work; and an end to the systemic racism and labor market discrimination that have limited opportunity for Black, Latino and Indigenous workers, especially women.

Even more sobering, to bring about the changes that the higher education system could achieve, we would need real, substantive reform on a scale that the postsecondary system – along with our legislators, policy makers and courts – have thus far failed to enact.

Too often, higher education tries to blame its failures on the K-12 system. Students aren't prepared for college, many postsecondary educators say. To some extent, they're right: higher education is the capstone in an educational system that is unequal from the beginning to the end. The inequality in oppor-

tunity begins at birth, and it accumulates across young people's lifetimes. We will never have truly equal opportunity in postsecondary education until we have equal opportunity at every step of the pipeline from birth through career. In order to reach our goal of ensuring that every person has a chance to realize their full potential, we must dismantle silos and treat early childhood education, K-12, higher education and the workforce as all one system.

If we looked at the system that way, we would recognize that each person's journey from youth to adulthood follows a single thread. And we could design our education and labor institutions to support young people on every step of the way. Throughout the system, we need massive investments in academic and career counseling and an end to the pernicious tracking by race and class that continues to plague our educational system even today. At the postsecondary level, we need to address the college affordability problem. And we need

## An Investment That Would Pay Off for Society (cont.)

to swiftly reverse the deepening inequity that COVID-19 has wrought on our education system, in which the gulf between elite and underfunded institutions has grown even larger than it was before the pandemic.

The chances that all these changes will happen may be slim. But those who think we can't immediately get started making progress are wrong. Already, **500,000 college-ready students** graduate high school each year and don't get a college credential. Most of those students enroll in college but don't graduate. The first step toward progress would be providing stronger academic and wraparound supports – including better academic and career counseling and mental health services; more comprehensive assistance with personal and financial needs, including tuition, childcare, food and housing; and stronger transfer pathways – to ensure that these

students can reach their educational goals.

The second step would be to strengthen the academic pipeline all the way back to early childhood. At present, our system fails far too many talented children. The chances of earning a college degree and finding a good job in young adulthood are often determined more by a student's family socioeconomic status than by early achievement – for American children, it's better to be rich than smart. A kindergartner from a family in the highest quartile of socioeconomic status (SES) but with low test scores has a **seven in 10 chance** of being high SES at age 25. In contrast, for a kindergartner with high test scores but from a family in the lowest SES quartile, the outlook is much dimmer: they would have only a three in 10 chance of being high SES by age 25.

As we see it, that's a glass half-full: we have an opportunity to ensure

that seven out of 10 talented low-income children who are currently failed by the system can fulfill their demonstrated potential. To deliver on that goal, we will need to treat supporting young people's success as a shared enterprise, which will mean building sound connections across the silos of early childhood education, K-12 education, post-secondary education and work through strong partnerships among educators and between educators and employers.

The barriers on the path to racial and economic justice are some of the most difficult challenges our country has faced. But if we pursue this endeavor with all due urgency and tenacity, the possibility of enacting change is in our hands. And that change could be both a boon to the individuals who would benefit the most from real educational opportunity and transformative for American society at large. ■

### Bio

*Anthony P. Carnevale is director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce and lead author of "The Cost of Economic and Racial Injustice in Postsecondary Education." Kathryn Peltier Campbell is a co-author and senior editor/writer at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Their report is part of a larger new report by the Postsecondary Value Commission, "Equitable Value: Promoting Economic Mobility and Social Justice Through Postsecondary Education," sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Inside Higher Ed received financial support from the Gates Foundation for coverage of the foundation's report on the value of higher education. Inside Higher Ed maintains editorial independence and full control over the content.*

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/05/12/racial-and-economic-injustice-higher-ed-costs-us-close-956-billion-annually-opinion>

# The Elites Can't Fix What's Wrong With College

It's time to hold them accountable for what they do and what they don't do, writes Jerome A. Lucido.

By **Jerome A. Lucido** // May 17, 2021

Once again, elite institutions are sucking the air out of the college admissions newsroom. Students, with their hopes bolstered by test-optional policies, have sent applications to the most selective private and public colleges skyrocketing. "I might have a chance this year" is the mantra.

But not so fast, my friends.

Wait lists are up ... way up. A **new national poll** shows that 20 percent of students making college choices are now on a wait list. Sadly, a disproportionate 29 percent of students who identify as Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) are wait-listed.

The expanded applicant pool at top-ranked institutions was an extraordinary opportunity for them to step away from the elitism that has the Ivy league, for example, enrolling more students from the **top 1 percent of the income distribution than they enroll in the entire bottom half**. Instead, we see expanded wait lists, particularly for people of color.

Are the elites doing their share to educate the nation? No, they are not.

Chartered in the public trust and wealthy well beyond the normal college or university, there is every reason to expect that they should be serving much higher proportions of low- and moderate-income stu-



JORGEANTONIO/GETTY IMAGES

**Harvard University**

dents and other populations like the BIPOC students on wait lists.

A recent opinion piece by **David Kirp**, author of *Shakespeare, Einstein and the Bottom Line*, suggested that the Ivies should expand and create branch campuses – Yale University in Houston, for example – to expand access to a high-quality education.

But location is not the constraint – these institutions could already be choosing to be more inclusive in their current locations. If they moved to Houston and admitted more of the same type of student (read: wealthy and white), what difference would it make?

The solution is not branch campuses for the elite but to reward all col-

leges and universities that have the will to serve the changing citizenry and workforce of America. To do this we need a new partnership between the federal government and higher education that would provide per-student subsidies to institutions in exchange for annual progress in the admission, funding and success of low- and moderate-income students. The burden of proof would be on institutions until such time that social mobility indicators, including both the numbers of low- and moderate-income students enrolling and graduating, are markedly improved.

**Virtually all the growth** in the college-aged population over the next two decades will come from groups

## The Elites Can't Fix What's Wrong With College (cont.)

who are currently excluded from or being served less well in the current system. Our nation's health, economically, politically and socially, depends on educating a far broader swath of society than we do today. We need to look past the great and powerful institutions behind the curtain and offer solutions that will ensure broader and more successful enrollment across all sectors of higher education for the good of our nation.

Like many scholars who are concerned about equitable access and completion rates in postsecondary education, I am pleased to see that the Biden administration is off to a promising start by offering infrastructure plans to bolster colleges that serve underrepresented populations, promoting free community college and considering a doubling of the national Pell Grant program that offers financial aid to low-income students.

Refreshingly, these ideas signal a recognition that the colleges that most serve first-generation, low-income and students of color are the community colleges, the regional public campuses and the many hundreds of unsung small

private colleges. However, the proposals will pump billions of additional federal dollars into the higher education sector but don't appear to be paired with adequate safeguards to ensure proper targeting and good outcomes. Simply pouring more money into our current system of vouchers – which provide more than \$120 billion in aid to students – is unlikely to produce better results or, for that matter, improve affordability if college prices continue to outpace available aid.

If new money is to come, it must be tied to results. The system of higher education, from institutions that are open access to those that are highly selective, needs to be accountable for doing better than it does today. Elite and less elite schools alike need to admit and graduate more low- and middle-income students. Enlightened education policy is the lever to get this done.

With funding from the Joyce Foundation, I have been convening a group of researchers and federal, state and institutional policy makers to focus on effective ways to increase the number of low- and moderate-income students that

enter college and graduate. We now believe that what is needed is greater funding for most institutions and accountability for all of them.

We need to establish thresholds for eligibility for the receipt of additional federal dollars, targeting those institutions that are currently underfunded and can improve outcomes with greater resources. We can ensure that these resources yield the desired outcomes by identifying the percentage of low- and moderate-income students that will need to be enrolled, along with targets for graduation rates. More resources and accountability will help address the problem of all the attention falling on the elites, by essentially making them less elite and improving outcomes across the rest of higher education.

More importantly, it is imperative that we help less advantaged students climb the escalator toward upward mobility. As a nation we will be acting in enlightened self-interest. Our economy and our democratic institutions need them. It is time to stop chasing Ivy and to start educating the fullness of the nation. ■

### Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/views/2021/05/17/most-competitive-colleges-admissions-cant-fix-whats-wrong-higher>

## Who Gets to Be 'College Material'?

Higher education institutions should reimagine the responsibility they have to ensure college is the true force for equity that it can and should be, Jeff Raikes argues.

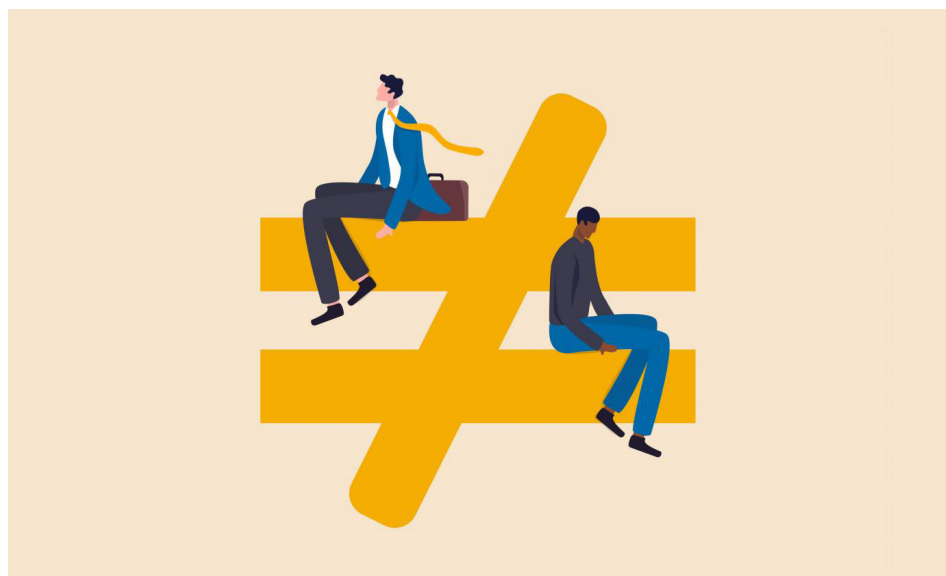
By **Jeff Raikes** // April 12, 2021

On day one of his presidency, Joe Biden signed 17 executive orders to reverse harmful policies enacted by his predecessor. What he can't undo with the stroke of a pen is the lasting impact of former president Donald Trump's harmful message that anyone who doesn't look like him – white, male, wealthy – isn't cut out for success in this country.

But let's face it. This thinking has been with us for a long time. It has roots in the pernicious bootstraps mythology America is famous for: the cult of individualism, of personal responsibility – all the while ignoring who has access to opportunity in the first place.

If the monumentally stressful year of 2020 was good for anything, it was that it held up a mirror to our bootstraps-entranced society. What was reflected was not a pretty picture. The last year was a long, painful refutation of that mythology and a glaring reminder of the deep racial inequities baked into our society. It has forced us as Americans to face our flaws and reminded us that we need institutions not to be gatekeepers but to work for us. To make us better. Healthier. More secure in our futures.

Higher education institutions have not escaped this reckoning. They have been forced to take a long, hard look at who has historically



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been seen as “college material” and who has been deemed unworthy of the rigors of higher education. The good news is that higher education has the capacity within its grasp to work for all students – not just the lucky ones.

But first, we finally need to ditch the phrase – and the thinking behind – what it means to be “college material” and reimagine what responsibility institutions of higher learning have in ensuring college is the true force for equity that it can and should be. With a new administration in the White House, people being vaccinated for COVID-19 and the prospect of “normal life” more clearly on the horizon, colleges and universities will need to ask themselves what kind of culture they

want to have when the pandemic is over.

College was designed for a slice of students who don't come close to representing the majority of those whom we have a responsibility to reach. And enrollment and graduation figures have historically reflected that. Over time, institutions have responded by trying to do a better job of getting underrepresented students in the door but not on what happens after they arrive. Unsurprisingly, the results have not been what we've hoped for. Black students are **25 percent** less likely than their white peers to complete their degree within six years of enrollment. That is just one statistic that reflects where we are falling short, and it points to a larger prob-

## Who Gets to Be 'College Material'? (cont.)

lem: something is going wrong between access and success – especially for students of color, first-generation students, low-income students and others whose experiences have been overlooked for generations.

In the past, when we've tried to diagnose why this disconnect has happened, we've typically focused on a familiar set of factors: an incomplete foundation from elementary and secondary school, family financial stresses that sap energy and focus, the absence of social-emotional skills that facilitate learning, the absence of "grit." Such explanations all have a common feature: they're outside the institution's control. And that has led to an abdication of responsibility on the part of colleges and universities when it comes to its own role in attending to how students experience their time on their campuses.

### **Identity, Safety and Social Belonging**

At the [foundation](#) I co-lead with my wife, Tricia, we have launched an initiative called the [Student Experience Project](#) that includes a network of institutions dedicated to tackling inequities in students' college success. Our partners in this work have developed the Student Experience Index, which collects actionable data on student experience, and how to transform it, that are helping those institutions make changes in real time.

More than 200 faculty members are collecting data in their classrooms and piloting tools to enhance students' experiences. One of those tools, called [ASCEND](#),

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If the monumentally stressful year of 2020 was good for anything, it was that it held up a mirror to our bootstraps-entranced society. What was reflected was not a pretty picture.

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gives professors better data on how students view their classes. Students periodically complete a five- to 10-minute survey, and a confidential report with disaggregated data shows professors how their classrooms are promoting or hindering equitable learning, as well as offers recommendations for improvement.

Many of the professors are already seeing positive movements – and not just from one semester to another but within the same semester. The real-time feedback encourages them to reflect on their practices and make changes that can have an immediate impact on student success. Importantly, student experience is a leading indicator, which is part of what makes it so valuable. Professors don't have to wait until they see missed assignments or poor test scores to adjust.

In other instances, faculty and administrators have used tools from the Student Experience Project

to revamp their communications with students. Instead of wondering why students don't show up to receive additional help, for example, they're using research to learn about how students receive their messages and how to reach out more effectively.

More than a decade of research in social psychology teaches us that positive experiences of community, belonging and academic support will not just improve a student's classroom experience but will also increase that person's likelihood of persistence and graduation – two stubborn barriers to achieving equity in higher education. We will have a lot more data to share from what we are learning with ASCEND and the SEP, but even now, the broad trends are deeply encouraging. Every single member institution participating in the Student Experience Project has improved their students' experience of identity, safety and social belonging. Many faculty members have shift-

## Who Gets to Be 'College Material'? (cont.)

ed those scores by more than 20 percentage points – some by more than 25 points for students of color – in just the first semester.

In one instance, for example, a professor heard directly from a student who said how welcomed and valued the changes to the syllabus made her feel. She said she felt seen as an individual when her instructor told the students that everyone who is in her class is supposed to be there

and that it's OK if some have to work a bit harder than others – that not all the students have to start from the same place. The student said she kept trying because she knew she was good enough. Her final piece of feedback that day was, "It's only been one day, and I feel so welcome."

What institution wouldn't want that for each and every one of their students? Educators and adminis-

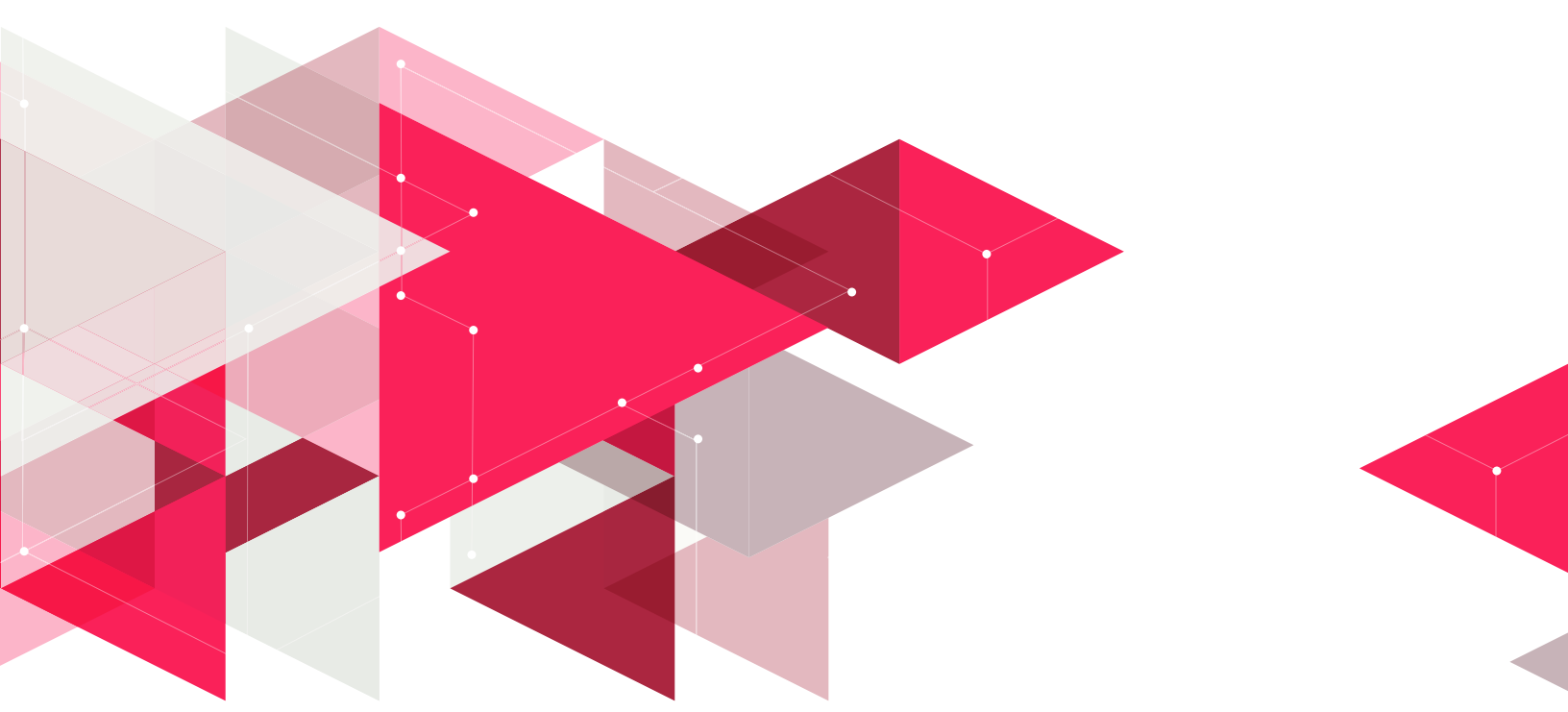
trators can dive into this work by learning about the [research behind student experience](#), looking at [disaggregated student experience data](#) and committing to put what they've learned into practice to create equitable learning environments as a lever for equitable outcomes. Imagine the possibilities for higher education, and for the nation, if the millions of students not deemed "college material" started to feel like they belonged there. ■

### Bio

*Jeff Raikes is the co-founder of the Raikes Foundation, which he and his wife, Tricia, established in 2002. He is also the chair of the Stanford University Board of Trustees. He was CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation from 2008 to 2014.*

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/04/12/colleges-should-reimagine-what-it-means-be-college-material-and-be-force-equity>



# The Fight for Diverse, Inclusive, Antiracist and Just Democracies

It requires disruptive change in higher education's values, use of resources and privileged place in many societies, write KerryAnn O'Meara, Ahmed Bawa, Hugo Garcia, Ira Harkavy, Rita Hodges and Hilligje Van't Land.

By **KerryAnn O'Meara, Ahmed Bawa, Hugo Garcia, Ira Harkavy, Rita Hodges and Hilligje Van't Land** // May 4, 2021

The ongoing racial injustice, pandemic and associated disruption of 2020 – along with the attack by violent insurrectionists on the U.S. Capitol building – have taught us many things about our societies, not only in the United States but also around the globe. Among those lessons is that higher education is deeply implicated in the impoverished and fragile state of democracies. Some academic and student leaders are calling for postsecondary institutions to make the creation of antiracist, inclusive, socially just democracies throughout the world priority No. 1. Such an undertaking requires disruptive change in higher education values, use of resources and its privileged place in many of our societies. Is higher education ready for such change?

At the 2020 Association for the Study of Higher Education **conference**, we shared research and practice from universities in South Africa, the United States and the International Association of Universities. We concluded that postsecondary institutions – notable contributions during the pandemic notwithstanding – have too often been complicit in systems that create or reproduce savage health and economic inequities, public disregard of science, and individuals who feel alienated and forgotten. Examples include



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the scarcity of locally situated university clinics and the lack of educational opportunities that perpetuates the exclusion of marginalized groups and working-class students. Indeed, COVID-19 has revealed the extreme poverty, persistent deprivation and pernicious racism that fester in the shadows of some of the nation's foremost institutions of higher learning. This disconnectedness from local community needs has promoted a sense of **disenfranchisement** by communities of color and increased the distrust society has of academics.

The widespread assumption that universities are progressive, multi-cultural, antiracist places has insu-

lated many of us who work and live in higher education from reckoning with the lived experiences of marginalized communities all over the world. Indeed colleges and universities are **gendered** and **racialized**, and many institutions perpetuate systemic racism, colonialism and sexism through **gatekeeping**, educational discrimination and not sharing vital resources with local communities.

It is crucial to embrace these multiple realities simultaneously: that higher education is deeply implicated in reproducing systemic discrimination and racism in the United States and around the world *and*, as we imagine what could be next,



## The Fight for Diverse, Inclusive, Antiracist and Just Democracies (cont.)

higher education is distinctly positioned to help build and develop the infrastructure, resources, values and education systems necessary for diverse, inclusive, antiracist democracies. And there are examples of students, faculty and staff engaged in that work.

In this moment of disruption, postsecondary leaders, students, faculty and staff might humbly consider four steps to advance antiracist, diverse and just democracies locally and globally.

### **No. 1: Redesign universities to focus on the development of students who help create antiracist democracies around the world.**

Although postsecondary institutions will always play a vital role in social mobility, the pandemic has made it clear that the most important thing K-12 and higher education can do is to educate ethical, engaged citizens for antiracist, diverse and socially just democracies. That means galvanizing students' growth as organic intellectuals, collaborative problem solvers and agents of social change.

For example, the University of Costa Rica requires 800 hours of community work for each student who matriculates. In 2017, "a total of 4,631 students did 1,038,150 hours of community work, in 164 projects in all areas of knowledge." Of significance, the former rector [describes](#) the purpose of this effort as "to raise awareness and promote social and critical awareness among students and the university community; and to collaborate with communities in identifying their problems in order to develop their

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own solutions, within horizontal relationships conducive to mutual learning.”

To better translate its strategic plan into action, the university has repositioned some of its buildings in the most underserved parts of the country, opening the doors to all people not attending yet interested to engage. Education for democratic citizenship through active engagement and collaborative problem solving with the local community should become a core purpose and pedagogical principle of higher education.

**No. 2: Reimagine the “knowledge project.”** The future we are imagining requires researchers from various fields and disciplines to take on the problems of our democracies and focus on issues of human benefit and local/global significance. To make that happen, universities need to incentivize and reward student, faculty and staff efforts to take on those issues in interdisciplinary

ways, listening to and in partnership with local communities. That will not only help democracies thrive but also make for better scholarship, as knowledge is powerfully advanced when research is conducted through partnerships between academics and nonacademics. Higher education institutions have been rightly critiqued by various members of society – including families, students, policy makers and community leaders – as gatekeepers, distancing the credentialed knowers from the uncredentialed receivers of knowledge.

The ongoing dialectic in South Africa between government, universities, social movements (like the Treatment Action Campaign) and industry produced a swift repurposing of university-based research and innovation platforms created to address the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic. This resulted in the participation of scientists in the global effort to identify new variants of the virus as well as to

## The Fight for Diverse, Inclusive, Antiracist and Just Democracies (cont.)

develop COVID-19 vaccines and treatments. In addition, engineering schools in the country have turned their attention to using 3-D printing to manufacture PPE and noninvasive ventilators.

More universities should play a key role in linking expertise from those within the academy and those on the ground, creating a community of **experts** and diverse voices to solve our world's most serious problems, such as poverty, unequal schooling and health care, and environmental degradation. We need to foster inclusive, expansive notions of expertise.

For instance, social scientists and educators can conduct participatory action research and develop methodological approaches that center community members' voice and place-based knowledge to more effectively solve locally manifested universal problems. Only then will the knowledge imperative be seen as relevant to the well-being of the many as opposed to the private gain of the few.

**No. 3: Change ownership of the university.** For too long, citizens have viewed their universities like privately held companies that have little relationship to their own lives. Yes, people have local pride when sports teams win, but that is not the same thing as postsecondary education being relevant and tied to the destiny of local citizens. That must change. A case in point: in Thailand, Siam University has decided to revitalize the unsafe university surroundings to provide for better living conditions and well-being for Thai people who have never before set foot in a **university**.

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The future we are imagining requires researchers from various fields and disciplines to take on the problems of our democracies and focus on issues of human benefit and local/global significance.

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On the other side of that world, University College Dublin has developed a wide range of **initiatives** to facilitate and enhance community engagement opportunities and build strong bridges between its campus and the neighboring communities. Universities must commit to serving as vital bridges between societies – and as multilateral organizations using their vast resources (especially their human and academic resources) and positions of privilege to advance social justice.

**No. 4: Get the values right.** The values that universities should hold dear are open inquiry, diversity and inclusion, democracy, equity, and justice. Equity and justice require inclusive representation among students and academics – including more people who are first-generation, from marginalized and working-class communities, and women. That would entail intentional recruitment within high schools situated in historically minoritized and

working-class neighborhoods, as well as actively recruiting recently minted Ph.D.s from BIPOC groups to fill the ranks of the professoriate.

It would also involve universities working in serious, sustained, comprehensive partnerships with public schools in their locality to diversify and enrich the educational pipeline. Universities should also reallocate funding to support the hiring and retention of women and people of color within the faculty and administrative ranks of the institution, as well as provide more scholarships to first-generation students.

To realize the values cited above requires a reorganization of resources to infuse democracy across all aspects of higher education. If such values were in place, we would use technologies in ways that do not exacerbate inequalities but strengthen their impact on human well-being and development. For example, the pandemic made clear that institutions have the capacity

## The Fight for Diverse, Inclusive, Antiracist and Just Democracies (cont.)

to provide more online education. For students who may not have the financial resources to attend universities face-to-face, online education can remove financial barriers that may otherwise hinder access.

Strengthening internationalization of higher education and global engagement and collaboration is crucial for these efforts. We need a global movement – one that leads to a global commons of engaged scholars and their community partners, scholarship and knowledge. To accomplish this, we need to incentivize scholars so they are rewarded for engaging in community-based projects. Many faculty members, particularly early-career ones, are dissuaded to devote any time that takes them away from the dominant discipline-based publication process. Thus, tenure and promotion should place more value

on publications and other scholarly products that focus on work with and contributions to communities.

Scholars also need to earn trust from communities. Community members have long complained that faculty come and mine places for data and leave without ever helping support the communities from which they collected those data. Universities and faculty need to help amplify the voice of the community and illuminate their needs to policy makers. These kinds of institutional changes will require lots of sharing and learning from colleagues across the globe, as occurs through both the International Association of Universities and the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy.

In the United States, people have criticized elected officials like Josh

Hawley and Ted Cruz for inciting violence at the U.S. Capitol because, having attended selective universities like Stanford, Princeton and Yale, “they should have known better.” Putting aside the elitist and rankist assumption that such institutions would have the monopoly on knowing better, we must recognize that, in fact, higher education has too often failed to effectively educate active citizens dedicated to creating and maintaining antiracist, inclusive and socially just democratic societies.

Just as many colleges and universities are reckoning with their own institutional histories of exclusion, higher education as a field must recognize where it has failed and come up short. Only then can it come honestly to tables with communities, governments and citizens to build inclusive, antiracist democracies together. ■

### Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/05/04/higher-ed-must-play-role-creating-antiracist-and-just-democracies-opinion>

## We Must End Either-Or Thinking About Skills

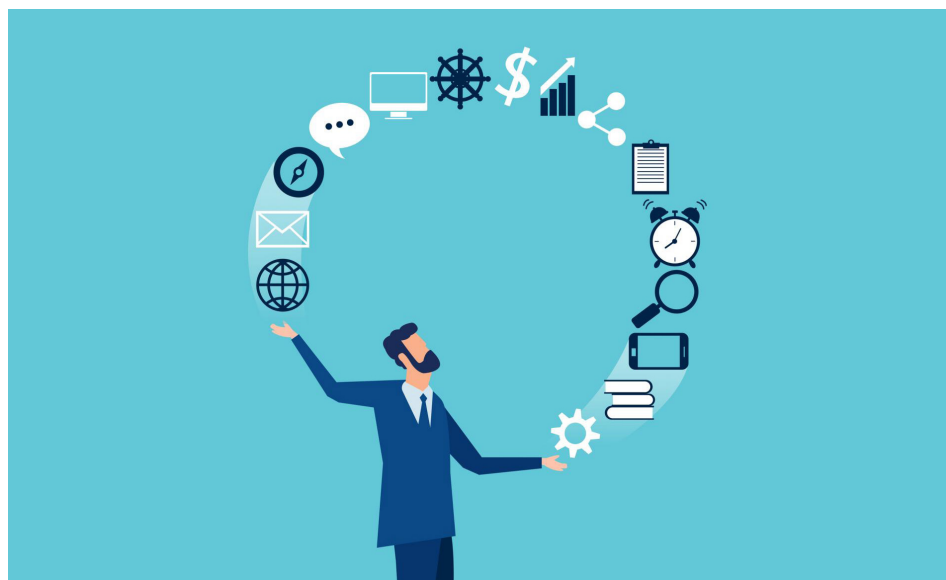
When it comes to building a better learning system, such a perspective presents a false choice that will intensify rather than diminish economic and social inequity, writes Debra Humphreys.

By **Debra Humphreys** // April 28, 2021

Words are powerful things. When deployed clearly and effectively, they can propel new ideas forward and motivate social change. Unfortunately, they also can bring more confusion than clarity and lead reformers down the wrong paths. We run that risk with the use of the word “skills” in the current debate about learning beyond high school. Getting our words and images right is particularly important as we address societal and educational inequity and as we begin to rebuild the post-pandemic economy.

A recent [survey of Gen Z teens](#) sponsored by the nonprofit corporation [ECMC Group](#) found that “61 percent believe a skill-based education (e.g. trade skills, nursing, STEM, etc.) makes sense in today’s world.” The survey also found that a slight majority (52 percent) believe they can “succeed in a career with post-secondary education other than a four-year degree.” [An article](#) highlighting these findings presented the two paths – four-year colleges, on the one hand, and career and technical education, on the other – as competing and utterly opposed options.

On the surface, the survey findings seem unsurprising and very sensible. Who doesn’t want a credential that is based on learning important skills? And Gen Zers are correct that some credentials other than a tradi-



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tional bachelor’s degree can, in fact, properly prepare them to secure and succeed in good entry-level jobs. That is why, as we shift from emergency mode to post-pandemic recovery mode, many commentators now call for expanding such short-term training programs, especially to help older workers whose jobs disappeared during the pandemic.

So, what is the problem with the language we are using to advance this movement to create a wider array of credentials and professional entry points? I worry that describing only certain credentials as “skills based” is profoundly misleading. It presents a false choice – particularly to first-generation students – that will intensify rather than diminish economic and social inequity.

It’s simply untrue that only programs such as “trades, nursing, STEM, etc.” help students hone skills. In fact, four-year degree programs across a wide array of fields help students develop very important skills – intellectual skills including analytic thinking, evidence-based reasoning and complex communication. Well-designed bachelor’s degree programs also teach very practical skills such as time and project management, research design, data analysis, and digital design.

Contrasting programs that are “skills based” with those that aren’t just doesn’t make sense. In fact, as noted economist Anthony P. Carnevale (an [Inside Higher Ed opinion contributor](#)) and his colleagues at

## We Must End Either-Or Thinking About Skills (cont.)

the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce suggest in their report “[The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate’s Degrees](#),” “Ultimately, the most valuable education *over the long term* is the one that provides the most marketable combination of specific and general skills” (emphasis added). Yet unfortunately, many Americans seem to prefer either-or to both-and thinking.

The stakes are very high. We simply cannot create a system of learning beyond high school in which some people – more likely to be low income, Black, Latino or Hispanic – are “tracked” into programs that fail to prepare them for short-term *and long-term* success. As my colleague Jamie Merisotis (an [Inside Higher Ed opinion contributor](#)) has compellingly argued in his recent book, [Human Work in the Age of Smart Machines](#), we need educational programs that cultivate a broad skill set – one that enables people to do the work that only humans can do as technology takes over more and more aspects of work.

As he notes, “Human work draws upon three sets of skills that everyone needs to develop to a greater or lesser extent: people skills, problem-solving skills, and integrative skills.” The good news is that, while these skill sets are broad and not easily mastered, we can nurture them in many ways. And, we needn’t – in fact, *shouldn’t* – choose between narrow technical

skills and these broader people skills. We can and must provide both throughout our credentialing system.

### Two Required Reforms

As we work to improve that system, two vital reforms are needed, and they should go hand in hand.

First, we need to create more on-ramps to good jobs by making shorter-term credentials more widely available. These programs must develop skills both sufficient for good entry-level jobs and robust enough to prepare workers to continue their learning, either on the job or in subsequent educational programs. All workers must also be learners, and they should have opportunities to hone higher-order analytic, interpretive, integrative and evaluative skills – the durable skills that will enable them to thrive over the long term.

Second, we must also do a far better job of designing and redesigning traditional four-year degree programs – both in the general education portion and in the majors. Throughout bachelor’s degree programs, we must embed both practical and intellectual skills that align well with today’s world of work. For too long, we have focused too exclusively on content knowledge and “coverage,” downplaying the need for new foundational skills geared to the digital economy.

Institutions of all sorts can now

use research from firms like Emsi or [Burning Glass Technologies](#) to help align their programs to the changing needs of the labor market. Recent research from Burning Glass, for instance, provides valuable insights as to the specific skills – some familiar and some very new – that today’s economy rewards. Many of these skills can easily be embedded in traditional degree programs in liberal arts and sciences.

[Educational research](#) suggests most students do better with this integrative, both-and approach. Knowledge acquisition and skills development go together. One can’t develop research skills, for instance, without some depth of knowledge. One doesn’t learn to write in the abstract; the mechanics of grammar can be learned, but no one can write effectively without some knowledge of the subject that they’re addressing. At the same time, simply amassing facts about a particular field, with no practice in applying that knowledge in the real world, will leave one ill prepared for life and work.

That sort of either-or thinking is the problem. We need new words and images, a new language that can help us build a reform agenda that avoids these false dichotomies. With such an agenda, we can create robust learning environments across all kinds of credentials and institutions, enabling all students to develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. ■

**Bio** Debra Humphreys is vice president of strategic engagement at Lumina Foundation.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/04/28/either-or-definitions-skills-present-false-choice-higher-education-opinion>

## An Infrastructure for Our Nation's Talent

Allowing learners to use the Pell Grant for short-term programs could build a different kind of bridge – one that links training, education and employment, argue Jamie Merisotis and Julie Peller.

By **Jamie Merisotis** and **Julie Peller** // April 20, 2021

For four years, “infrastructure week” was a promise unfulfilled – a bumper sticker on a car stuck in the driveway. With the recent passage of the American Rescue Plan and introduction of its infrastructure package, the Biden administration now has its chance.

Infrastructure spending has typically been focused on investments in things like roads, bridges and pipes – the physical infrastructure that makes up and connects our country. But when thinking about what infrastructure means for the nation, or could mean for it, the administration and policy makers should expand their vision. If the country is going to invest in infrastructure, it shouldn't be just about roads. It should also be about people, with an intentional focus on the talent and training that prepares them for today's jobs – and tomorrow's.

Investing in talent isn't just smart, it's also necessary. The country faces a continuing economic downturn, despite the drop in the unemployment rate to around **6.2 percent**. While that is an improvement over last year's alarming numbers, it doesn't tell the whole story. The **National Women's Law Center** found that over the course of the pandemic, more than 2.3 million women have left the labor force. And people of color, particularly Black and Latino adults, face **higher**



ALEXEY YAREMENKO/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

**unemployment rates** than white adults.

Though the American Rescue Plan includes provisions that can help unemployed Americans now, we must look to the future. The growth of automation and artificial intelligence mean that, now more than ever, we need a more flexible and responsive higher learning system. We need a system that prepares Americans for the changing nature of work – a system that equips people to work in concert with technology, doing the human work that machines can't do.

Just like America's roads and bridges, building the nation's talent for the future requires strategic investment, careful planning and

partnerships. Investing in people by creating high-quality jobs with good wages should be the goal. But to make that a reality, we need to rethink how our current education and workforce training systems operate. Right now, those systems operate independently, and it's difficult for learners to move between them. We've siloed learners, asking them to choose between short-term, job-driven training and long-term education. That can no longer be acceptable; connecting these systems is essential to the nation's recovery and prosperity.

Allowing learners to use federal support, like the Pell Grant, for high-quality and connected short-term programs could build a differ-

## An Infrastructure for Our Nation's Talent (cont.)

ent kind of bridge – one that links training, education and employment. Pell Grants help millions of students afford college. But right now, those grants can't be used for short-term credential programs at community colleges, which are more accessible for many students, including those who are adults and parents with busier schedules.

Data show that Pell Grants for short-term programs can work for students. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education piloted a program that expanded Pell Grant eligibility to programs that range from eight to 15 weeks, in fields like transportation and materials moving, health professions, and mechanic and repair technologies. Students who were offered an experimental Pell Grant to pay for one of those programs were **15 percent more likely** to enroll, and program completion increased by **9 percent**.

But in expanding access to short-term programs, policy makers should take some important steps, including ensuring that students complete and secure well-paying jobs. They should also make sure that lower-income students and students of color aren't tracked into

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If the country is going to invest in infrastructure, it shouldn't be just about roads. It should also be about people, with an intentional focus on the talent and training that prepares them for today's jobs – and tomorrow's.

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programs that lead to low-wage jobs. And they should see to it that the credentials earned in these short-term programs are stackable – that is, easily transferred to other institutions if students later choose to pursue further education like an associate or bachelor's degree. Indeed, if programs don't lead to higher-wage jobs or yield stackable credentials, they could actually deepen existing inequities rather than increasing opportunities for all Americans.

This is a crucial time for our coun-

try, but it's also a great opportunity for lasting improvement. By opening the door to short-term programs to students at every income level, we'll guarantee that all students can earn the credentials they need for employment. And if we do it right, we can also make certain they have access to the learning that will give them the human work skills they will need throughout their careers. If we're going to invest in the physical infrastructure of the country, let's also invest in its people: today's, and tomorrow's, students. ■

### Bio

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