

Should College Be Free?

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Rising College Costs and the Historical Role of Higher Education

In recent decades, the cost of attending college has dramatically increased. It is regarded as an elite privilege, one that many cannot afford and, therefore, are opting out from attending. In contrast, those who choose to go to college are often burdened with life-long student loans, which remain due even after retirement. As a result of this educational crisis of rising costs, the proposition of free college education is becoming a widely supported idea. This essay aims to explore the [pros and cons](#) associated with a free college education and establishes a conclusion that college education should, indeed, be free of cost.

Higher education was introduced in the United States in 1636, and today, it is well-known around the world. Modelled after Cambridge and Oxford universities in England, the earliest colleges in the US were established by religious faculties to train ministers. The funding for the earliest colleges, such as Harvard College in colonial times, came from the colonies as most institutes sought endowments. The purpose of colleges to train only ministers to political leaders has shifted greatly over time (Geiger). Most colleges today do not offer church-related curriculums, and separate Catholic institutes are set up for students opting for this career path. This exemplifies the shift in the role of a college education.

The nineteenth century saw a boom of college institutes springing up, and the curriculum shifted from liberal arts to mechanical and agriculture-based courses. Law and medicine were offered initially by more prestigious institutes. Today, colleges offer a multitude of courses to select from, and students can pursue a career path of their choice. However, not all can afford this privilege. A considerable percentage of students around the world are impacted by the financial constraints caused by the rising cost of a college education due to inflation.

Student Debt and the Case for Tuition-Free College

Considering the vitality of education in today's world, steps must be taken to offer a cost-free college experience for students. The notion of free-of-charge College is no more radical than free K-12 education. Initially, the percentage of students attending high school was quite low, and only a few elementary or high schools offered free education. In the early 1700s, only a few common schools were free, and the notion of free elementary education for young children did not become popular until the mid-1800s. This was partially due to the efforts of the Secretary of Education in Massachusetts, Horace Mann, who was an advocate of compulsory education. His efforts resulted in

free high schools in the Northern states by the 1880s. However, by 1900, laws for compulsory schooling were only enforced in 34 states. However, by 1918, elementary school education became compulsory for all children in the US. By the mid-1900s, around 50% of young adults graduated high school; however, today, this percentage has increased to 88 per cent. The concept of free education has evolved, and the next step is cost-free college (Kurfiss).

Another reason for free college is that there is a heightened requirement for an educated workforce to sustain the economy. There has been a remarkable transformation in the world since the mid-1900s. Today, knowledge-based jobs are increasing, and advanced technical skills are in demand more than in the past. Today, a college education is increasingly important as, most of the time, enough qualified people are not available to fill the positions. An educated workforce would boost the economy and increase tax revenues. With more people employed at good jobs, unemployment funds and public assistance would not be required.

On average, students graduating from college incur a debt of nearly \$30,000 in the form of a student loan. According to the Federal Reserve data of 2021, borrowers owe a total student loan debt of approximately \$1.73 trillion. Apart from housing debt loans, student loans have exceeded all other forms of debt in the United States (Hornsby). The debt amount is significantly high for graduates and professionals. As a result, students spend most of their lives paying off this amount and fail to become contributing members of the economy. Such massive student loan debts bar students from purchasing houses and other consumer items and from contributing more to the economy.

Civic Participation and Educational Equality

Another important factor for an educated population is that it would enable individuals to become thoughtful political participants. A college education is not important at an individual level, rather it has a significant impact on the country as a whole. Republics and democracies require a fully literate populace for effective political participation. With a college education to widen their perspectives, individuals can vote with complete information of the historical context and a clear understanding of the system. People would be more aware of the underlying economic and social issues. College education exposes students to concepts and theories that are not commonplace. This is the strongest argument for mandatory college education.

One of the biggest dilemmas that arise from an expensive college education is that often, those who are unable to afford it are the ones with the best high school grades. Coming from low-income households, these individuals do not get a chance to attend the best school and, therefore, often have to opt for low-rated colleges which are more affordable. This results in the wastage of the best human resources. The brainpower that could be contributing to economic advancement, medical breakthroughs, technological wonders, and leadership in several fields is, instead, being wasted due to an overpriced college education. Such individuals either do not get the chance to attend college or settle for a less-than-suitable alternative institute.

Limitations of Financial Aid and Class-Based Exclusion

Colleges have student aid programs that offer merit-based and need-based assistance. However, the current student assistance programs are quite inadequate. As a result, students are forced to shift their focus to gathering tuition fees rather than studying. If college education were free, students would not have to worry about scraping funds for each school term. A larger percentage would be able to complete their graduate degrees on time and become contributing members of the community by taking on important jobs. It is noteworthy that since 1978, the cost of a four-year graduate degree has increased by 1122 per cent. Back then, students were able to earn enough wages through summer jobs to pay their tuition. However, the same is far from true today, and students are unable to earn tuition even if they work the whole year. Moreover, student aids are almost useless. A grant that covered 75% of tuition fees back in 1973 now only covers 30% of the average cost (Kurfiss).

The high-priced college education has made it a luxury that only a certain class can pay for. Every year, more and more low-income students are unable to afford college, resulting in a growing wage gap. The ones who somehow manage to attend college are, for life, burdened by crushing debt. These heavy loans impact all economic decisions, and such individuals have a decreased probability of owning a house or accumulating wealth. It also impacts their decision to get married and have children. A person's economic background must not hold them back from life opportunities, and everyone should get a level playing field to excel in life (The Education Revolution).

Historical Arguments, Policy Considerations, and Conclusion

The concept of a free college education is not a new one. In 1785, this idea was presented by the US President, John Adams. He posited that "the whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and must be willing to bear the expense of it" (Goodwin and Sommervold). Similarly, in 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes, in his Inaugural address, stated that the root of all prosperity was the improved intellect and morality of people and that "universal suffrage should rest upon universal education. To this end, liberal and permanent provisions should be made for the support of free schools by the state governments, and, if need be, supplemented by legitimate aid from national authority" (Rutherford B. Hayes Organization). Many countries around the world are already successfully implementing the idea of free college. These nations view education as a tool to improve the economy and understand the importance of investing in it.

Although many support the idea of a cost-free college, some oppose it as well. The opponents believe that college, in the real sense, can never be free because even if the students do not pay for it, the

taxpayers would have to. Moreover, free college would mean that more people would attend. This would result in waiting lists to accommodate the growing number of students. Finally, the opponents of this idea believe that it would impact the quality of education. Reduced funding by the government may result in teacher turnover or a reduction in the number of degree programs offered (Kurfiss).

Conclusively, it can be stated that while there are certain cons associated with a free college education, its advantages are greater. Educators and policymakers must work collaboratively with economists to gauge the long-term impact of this investment and initiate a plan to provide free college education.

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