

Free Community College: An Investment in America's Future

Deciding which path to choose after high school can be difficult enough with the pressure that comes from society, parents, and peers. For millennials, this decision is one that has already been made; and for those of us who chose to pursue higher education many now feel as though we will be paying the price for the rest of our lives. High student loan debts and outrageous interest rates have caused substantial the choice to continue education. As a result, they have been met with many more factors to consider when deciding what to do with the rest of their lives. America's students should not be

loans' accrued interest. You could say that's what they signed up for, but many of these students are applying for loans at 17/18 years old with little understanding of the gravity of the situation.

These high burdens of debt are impacting the economy beyond the school system and delaying students' abilities to hit significant adult milestones. While degree-holders may be earning a higher income on average, much of that income must be funneled into student loan payments. Many students have chosen to move back in with parents after graduation, because high student loan payments make it difficult to afford a move or the rent that would follow. High student loan balances have also delayed decisions to marry, since debt of both parties would become shared. Even greater still, is the impact student loans have had on reproductive decisions. Student loans are cited often as a reason for couples' choices to delay children or to decide against having them entirely. Much of this decision falls on women as they tend to be more likely to attend college than men and are additionally more likely to attend graduate schools. CSNBC states, "In a March poll by Future Family, a start-up that helps women understand fertility, 44 percent of women said they had student debt. Half of those women said the loans affect their decision about having children" (Dickler). At 17 and 18 years old when exiting high school, students should not be forced to choose between their education, and the potential to start a family 10-15 years down the line.

The impact of high student loan balances has also bled into the housing market. Most Americans consider homeownership to be the ultimate marker of success in adulthood. But having a high student loan balance can make that dream seem unachievable. Less disposable income also means less income that can be saved, which means those who are looking to purchase a home lack the ability to accumulate a large sum of money to put toward a deposit. It

you have a high income-to-debt ratio, meaning a large portion of your monthly income goes toward paying off your debts. A mortgage would add to your debts, so you may be considered too great of a risk or viewed as financially irresponsible. Having a high burden of debt can also hurt your credit score- another factor lenders will look to in deciding whether you are fit for additional loans. “More than 80 percent of people ages 22 to 35 with student debt who haven't bought a house yet blame their educational loans, according to the National Association of Realtors” (Nova). The inability to purchase a home also denies students with high loan balances the even greater opportunity to invest in a property that will appreciate over time. This also means they are missing out on the potential to generate wealth that can be passed down to the next generation- if they have any children to pass it down to.

While it should be very clear by now that high student loan balances and interest rates are a recognizable problem, I am not proposing that existing student loan debt should be forgiven. It is my understanding that student loan forgiveness is at this point a controversial topic that has become a debate of “constitutionality”. I am also not arguing that all education should be free. However, student loans, high interest rates, and access to education are all factors that both directly and indirectly impact the economy, and social mobility. Free community college could give these students the chance to earn a college education without denying them their chance at a future- should they desire to own a home or have children. Creating cost-free and affordable alternatives for education could prevent the

state schools, then private research universities and for-profit schools. Issues regarding the hierarchy of education in the United States were brought up by Sara Goldrick-Rab- a professor of sociology and medicine, and David Labaree-Professor Emeritus at Stanford University during their Policy Dialogue discussion regarding “The Problems and Promises of Higher Education in the United States

American students are more educated, it creates greater opportunity for technological advancement. It means we have more doctors, more architects, more creative minds and critical thinkers who are prepared to enter the workforce and make meaningful contributions to society. Education is a public good, and we benefit both economically and as a society by being more educated. Students who are able to graduate from college debt-free are able to earn, save, and spend their money as they please and stimulate the economy.

While at least 23 states in the US have already enacted some variation of a free community college program, community college is not universally free across the United States. There have been numerous proposals made for free college tuition over the years. One proposal was the College for All Act which would “eliminate undergraduate tuition at four-year public institutions by providing two-thirds of the funds required to bring every school’s tuition from its current level down to zero” (Deming). There was also Elizabeth Warren’s plan to make all public tuition free, as well as cancel student loan debt and to increase funding to Pell Grants. Both of these programs were quite progressive. More recently, Biden proposed his Build Back Better plan, which would appropriate \$45.5 billion to cover 2 years of tuition at community colleges-enough to earn an Associate Degree. The first year would be covered entirely by federal funds and would gradually incorporate both federal and state shares. Enacting a plan like Biden’s would expand free community college across the United States. While the future of his proposal is uncertain due to difficulties with earning the full approval of legislators, as time goes on it is my hope that we will make the right choice to invest in our students’ futures.

Community colleges across the country are known to be cultural melting pots, accommodating diverse populations of student backgrounds. They give returning students who are continuing education unique opportunities to further their careers. They have honors

programs which challenge advanced learners and offer recognition for their academic success. They give students across the United States the opportunity to choose an education without taking on a high burden of debt. Whether a student chooses to enter the work force, a trade school, a community college, or to apply for a student loan and attend another school, they deserve to make that choice consciously, not out of fear or necessity, but because it is the best path for their goals.

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