



THE FOLLY OF FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOR ALL

How federally-funded free community college puts taxpayers on the hook without ensuring better educational and job outcomes for students.

By: Rachel Craddock

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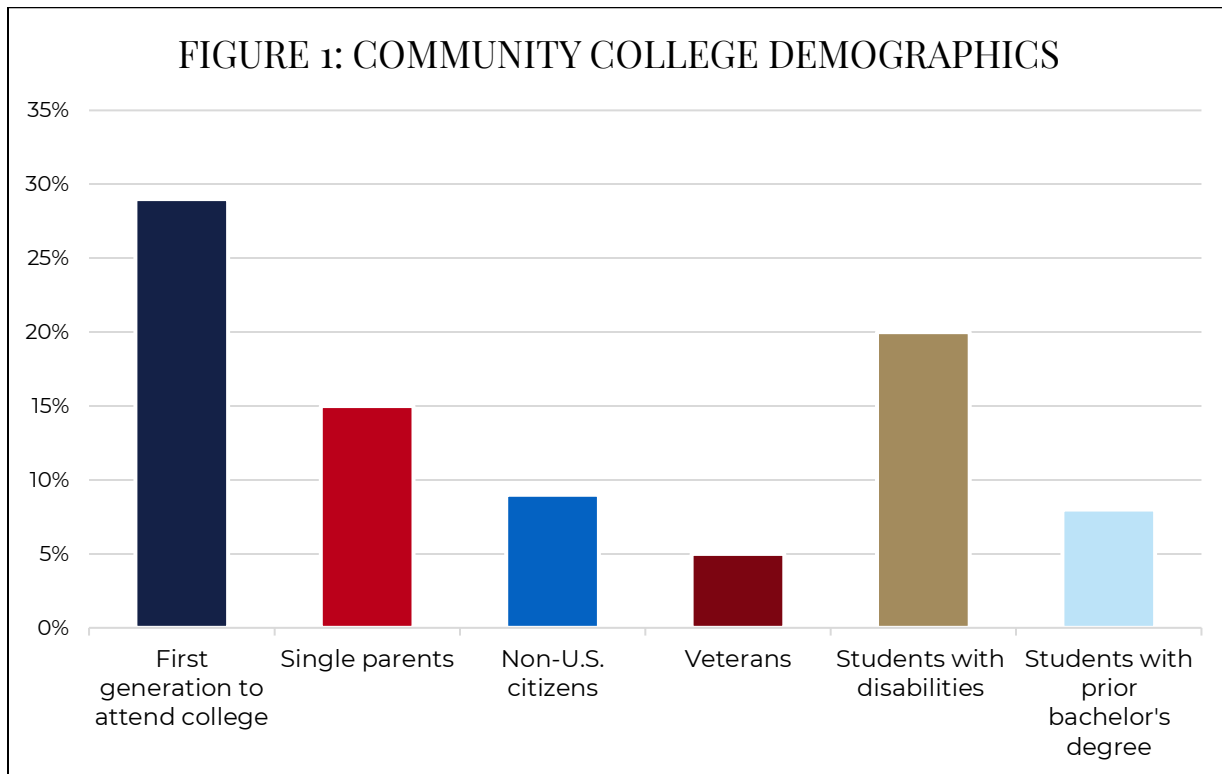
Calls for universal free community college have once again consumed the D.C. policy arena. The current administration is preparing to add billions of dollars more to the Nation's credit card to be paid by future generations, showing little interest in being responsible stewards of taxpayer money or in insisting on policies that deliver a positive return on taxpayer investment for the American people. Once one looks beneath the superficial appeal of more taxpayer-financed D.C. giveaways, serious concerns emerge regarding costs, the lack of a plan to improve student outcomes that lead to rewarding careers, and the role government bureaucrats are likely to play in America's community college system—a key workforce pipeline.

In response to a growing number of community colleges and some state-level initiatives, voices across the Nation have increasingly deliberated the idea of free community college ([Bell, 2021](#)). In many cases, community college is one of the most affordable gateways to a 4-year degree. Why not, then, go all the way and make community college “free” by shifting the cost burden from students to taxpayers as is done with K-12? After all, some states already have instituted a version of free community college tuition on their own. In fact, in 2015, President Obama used examples from the states to motivate his call for universal free community college ([The White House, 2015](#)). To evaluate the promise or folly of such federal intervention, we must develop a deep understanding of the community college system, evidence regarding the likely effects of free college, and the key differences between initiatives at the state level and a one-size-fits-all plan from the federal government. As is often the case, the government stepping in to make something “free” can lead to a proliferation of serious issues and fail to solve the problem that motivated the intervention originally.

BACKGROUND ON AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

As of 2019, approximately 11.8 million students were enrolled in the 1,044 community colleges across the United States. Many enrollees are what can be considered as “non-traditional students,” who are an average age of 28 years old, with 62 percent of full-time and 72 part-time students possessing a job while in school ([American Association for Community Colleges, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, community college attendance is quite common, accounting for 41 percent of all undergraduate enrollment ([The College Board, 2020](#)).

Figure 1 below represents some of the unique demographics of students enrolled at community colleges ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2018](#)).



Since Joliet Junior College was established in 1901 as the first 2-year college, many other community colleges have come into existence to prepare Americans of every stripe to enter the workforce ([Joliet Junior College, 2017](#)). Community colleges play a critical role in providing various pathways to career opportunities, especially to low-income students. As of 2021, about 83 percent of community college students nationwide received financial assistance ([Community College Review, 2021](#)). Moreover, data from 2016 indicates that 27 percent of dependent undergraduates at public 2-year colleges are in poverty, and over half come from families earning less than \$50,000. Among independent students, this number rises to 78 percent ([Fry & Cilluffo, 2019](#)) ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2016](#)). Researchers have found that communities with a larger number of community colleges per capita have a higher rate of attendance, while communities with fewer community colleges have a lower rate ([Dougherty, Lahr & Morest, 2017](#)). The data revealed that when individuals have more options and/or opportunities to attend a community college, they are more likely to do so. At the same time, some students transition from community college directly to the workforce; 30 percent nationwide transfer to a 4-year university within 6 years ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)). The Department of Education reported that in fall 2019, 32 percent of students attended a 2-year college before enrolling at a 4-year institution ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2019](#)).

Community College Costs

Community college owes some of its popularity to more affordable prices. On average, published tuition and fees (sticker price) at community colleges were roughly \$3,770 in 2020–2021 as compared to \$10,560 for in-state students at 4-year public universities for full-time students in one academic school year ([College Board, 2021](#)). Even the low sticker price

of community colleges fails to tell the whole story. A study completed in 2016 found that 44 percent of full-time community college students have no tuition cost or receive grants that cover other college expenses. Furthermore, 14 percent of students paid less than \$1,100, and another 14 percent paid a little over \$3,400 after grants ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2016](#)). In addition, data from 2017–2018 indicates that only 19 percent of students at public 2-year colleges took out student loans ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2018](#)). Moreover, one 2015 study reports that, upon entering repayment, the median borrower (which excludes the many people who complete community college debt-free) has a cumulative balance of under \$12,000 ([Looney & Yannelis, 2015](#)). A separate 2015 study finds that less than 1 percent of associate degree recipients graduate with \$50,000 or more in student debt ([Baum & Johnson, 2015](#)). Thus, for the most part, community colleges are already a more affordable—and in many cases close to free—educational option for Americans looking to advance their career prospects. **Figures 2** and **3** highlight the various forms of aid community college students can and do receive.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of community college students who received financial aid in the 2015–2016 school year.

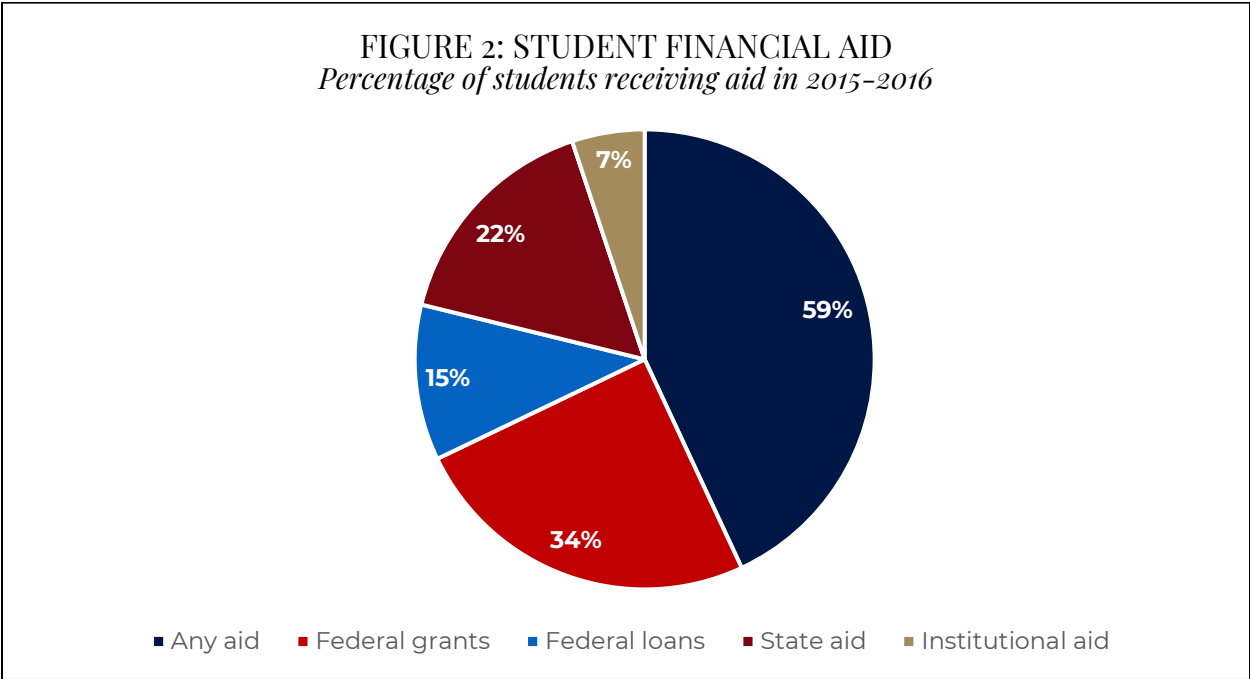
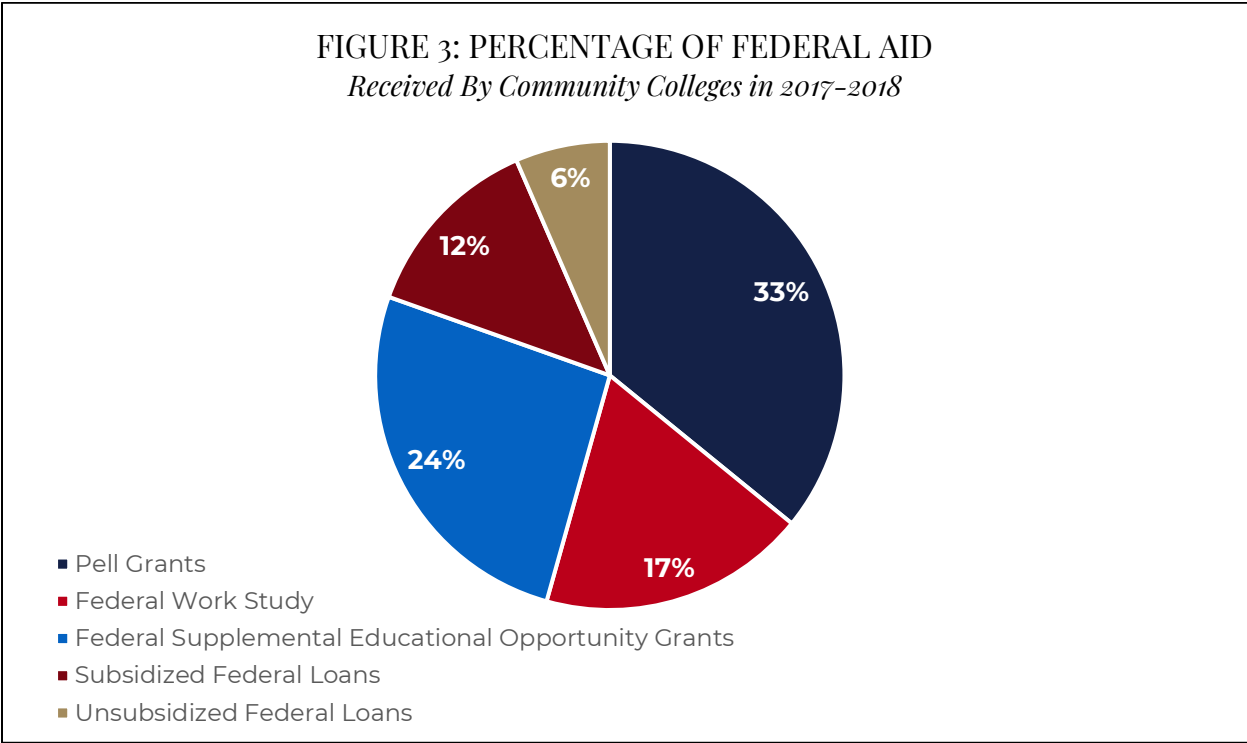


Figure 3 below breaks down the percentage of the different types of federal aid provided to community colleges for students. Each of these figures allows us to better understand how much funding is already going toward students and community colleges to make them affordable and attainable ([American Association for Community Colleges, 2021](#)).



Community College Benefits

The attractiveness of community college is not limited to its costs. On average, it also leads to noticeable earnings gains. An assessment of several studies concludes that completing an associate degree yields an average gain of \$4,640–\$7,160 per year in earnings, with technical or occupational programs giving rise to the strongest returns on investment ([Belfield & Bailey, 2017](#)). An earnings premium of this size can translate to nearly \$290,000 throughout a 40-year career. Even students who do not complete a degree can benefit from the skills they acquire in a 2-year program, particularly career and technical education ([Bahr, 2018](#)). At the other end of the spectrum, for many students, attending a 2-year college is not the end of their educational journey but rather a springboard to subsequently obtaining a bachelor’s degree, which can further boost yearly pay by \$18,772 ([Stobierski, 2020](#)).

The programmatic offerings at community colleges have increased in response to growing educational and workforce needs. Particularly promising are vocational education programs, which have demonstrated their effectiveness in providing alternative pathways to a 4-year degree to having family-sustaining and rewarding careers ([Dougherty, Lahr & Morest, 2017](#)). As evidence of their growing popularity, short vocational credentials increased by 109 percent from 2000–2012 as students sought to propel themselves into higher-paying industries. Depending on the program, some require a full-time, 2-year associate’s degree or a certificate ([Soliz, 2016](#)). Some of these credentialing programs are long-term certificates for fields such as nursing, law enforcement, business, and a variety of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. As referenced earlier, several studies find labor market benefits associated with earning vocational credentials, especially in technical fields

([Stevens, Kurlaender & Grosz, 2018](#)). For example, students attending community colleges for technical credentials or degrees in Florida have the largest return on their degrees in industries such as construction, manufacturing, and health. Students receiving certificates to be dental assistants also experienced positive labor market returns. ([Soliz, 2016](#)).

Challenges Facing the Community College System

The community college system faces many longer-term challenges. When 17 million Americans need to be reskilled by 2030, according to estimates from McKinsey Institute researchers ([Lund et al., 2021](#)), community colleges have received criticism for outdated vocational programs, low completion rates, and high student default rates despite generally low loan balances. A 2015 study reports that only 40 percent of students at 2-year colleges successfully complete a degree, compared to anywhere from 60 to 80 percent at 4-year colleges, rising with institutional selectivity ([Looney & Yannelis, 2015](#)). In 2017, the default rate of borrowers at 2-year colleges was over twice that of borrowers at 4-year colleges ([College Board, 2020](#)). While some point to the widespread concerns about student debt and default as a reason for instituting free community college (or free college more broadly), the empirical evidence reveals that default rates are highest among those with the lowest balances, with default more than three times as common among borrowers with cumulative balances under \$5,000 compared to among those owing over \$20,000 ([Hedlund, 2019](#)). Instead, poor graduation and labor market outcomes appear to be important drivers of default—that is, situations where students accrue modest debt, drop out without earning a credential, and then are unable to service even modest payment amounts ([Holzer & Xu, 2019](#)). In addition to these challenges, the onset of COVID-19 reduced enrollment and transfer numbers across community colleges and four-year institutions, with community colleges hit the hardest. By the fall of 2020, community colleges saw a 7.5 percent decline in enrollment and a 15.2 percent decline in transfers ([National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021](#)). In the California community college system, enrollment plummeted by 15 percent in fall 2020 relative to the previous year ([Bulman & Fairlie, 2021](#)). Unfortunately, the current administration has used these COVID-related challenges as an excuse to pursue misguided free community college policies.

THE FOLLY OF FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOR ALL

Despite its superficial allure, free community college for all is essentially guaranteed to fall far short of promises and fail to be the remedy that addresses America's urgent educational and workforce needs. While proponents resort to ill-conceived analogies between taxpayer-financed K-12 education and their vision for government-controlled higher education, numerous studies highlight the shortcomings of such a one-size-fits-all, myopic, money-centric approach. For example, one study finds that increasing college subsidies stimulates a larger enrollment response from youth coming from wealthy families than those coming from families of more modest means ([Lochner & Monge-Naranjo, 2008](#)), concluding that a universal subsidy would magnify earnings inequality rather than shrink it. Another study emphasizes the importance of college preparedness, pointing out that college subsidies come too late in life to help low-income students ([Restuccia & Urrutia, 2004](#)).

The issue of academic preparedness sheds light on an important distinction: boosting college enrollment—a nearly meaningless metric on its own—and raising educational attainment through a larger number of people completing their certificate or degree programs. This distinction between attainment and enrollment—that is, between meaningful outputs and mere inputs of educational opportunity—is critical, as America

gains little by subsidizing greater entry into college of students who end up ultimately dropping out. Unfortunately, recent scholarship provides evidence that such an outcome is precisely what America may get if it pursues free community college nationwide. Revealing that such an idea is anything but new, a study from 2003 found that subsidizing college to such an extent as to decide to enroll independently of income would barely raise attainment and would lead to significantly higher taxes and college dropout rates from the enrollment of academically unprepared students ([Caucutt & Kumar, 2003](#)). Other work delivers a similar disheartening message: Money-centric policies that seek to subsidize enrollment without addressing deficiencies in pre-college academic preparedness are likely to be met by a resulting rise in dropout rates that offsets any desired gains in college completion ([Athreya, Kartik & Eberly, 2021](#)). Another study explains that differences in academic preparedness create wide disparities in the economic return to college enrollment, taking into account the dropout probability. The same study concludes that roughly 40 percent of the population places no value on the option to attend college regardless of large public tuition subsidies ([Athreya et al., 2019](#)), in part because they are cognizant of their likelihood of dropping out. Free community college could lead to a net decline in 4-year college completion rates making matters even worse. Even though community colleges can at times act as a gateway to a 4-year degree, the study concludes that making community colleges substantially cheaper than they already are relative to 4-year colleges would divert some students into lower-quality institutions that produce higher dropout rates ([Goodman, Hurwitz & Smith, 2016](#)) ([Terry Long & Kurlaender, 2008](#)).

Lastly, because “free” is merely a euphemistic buzzword for taxpayer-financed rather than user-financed, giving government greater control over the financing and pricing of community colleges inevitably opens the door to more government micromanagement of college operations. Beside increasing the risk of bureaucratic inefficiencies, such a move also opens the door to further watering down the educational mission of colleges while opening the door to government officials holding greater sway over how community colleges conduct themselves.

THE BIDEN PLAN

In the face of this significant body of evidence, the Biden Administration’s American Families Plan includes a \$109 billion proposal for free community college for all that is likely to be included in the pending reconciliation package. The plan aspires to resolve workplace inequality and increase wages for low-income families but, by merely throwing money at the problem, does nothing in the way of addressing the drivers of degree non-completion and default. While this large spending plan may keep the institutions afloat and encourage an influx of student enrollment, there is little indication that it will resolve shortcomings related to lack of college preparation, low quality among some community colleges, and cases of misalignment between curriculum content and workforce needs of employers.

Some people, including former President Obama, have lauded state-level efforts, such as the Tennessee Promise program, by oversimplifying them as “free community college” policies that can act as a model for free community college at the federal level. Indeed, some studies have found positive effects on academic achievement from Tennessee Promise and its local predecessor, Knox Achieves ([Carruthers & Fox, 2016](#)). However, free college advocates gloss over crucial details of the program that indicate it is about far more than just the government paying for college. Rather, it is an intensive program that requires participants to meet regularly with a mentor throughout their senior year of high school and the following

summer before enrolling in community college. Moreover, to continue receiving financial support, participants need to contact their mentor and complete community service each semester. A research study that examined the effects of the policy indicates that the monetary aid is likely not the primary reason for the program’s success, in part because the gains in college enrollment and credit completion have been the largest among students who already face a meager net cost of attendance and thus likely saw little to no scholarship aid from the program ([Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015](#)). The plan under the Biden Administration contains no such comprehensive mentoring. It would not be advisable for the federal government to be the entity to spearhead such efforts in a one-size-fits-all manner.

DISPELLING COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND FALSEHOODS

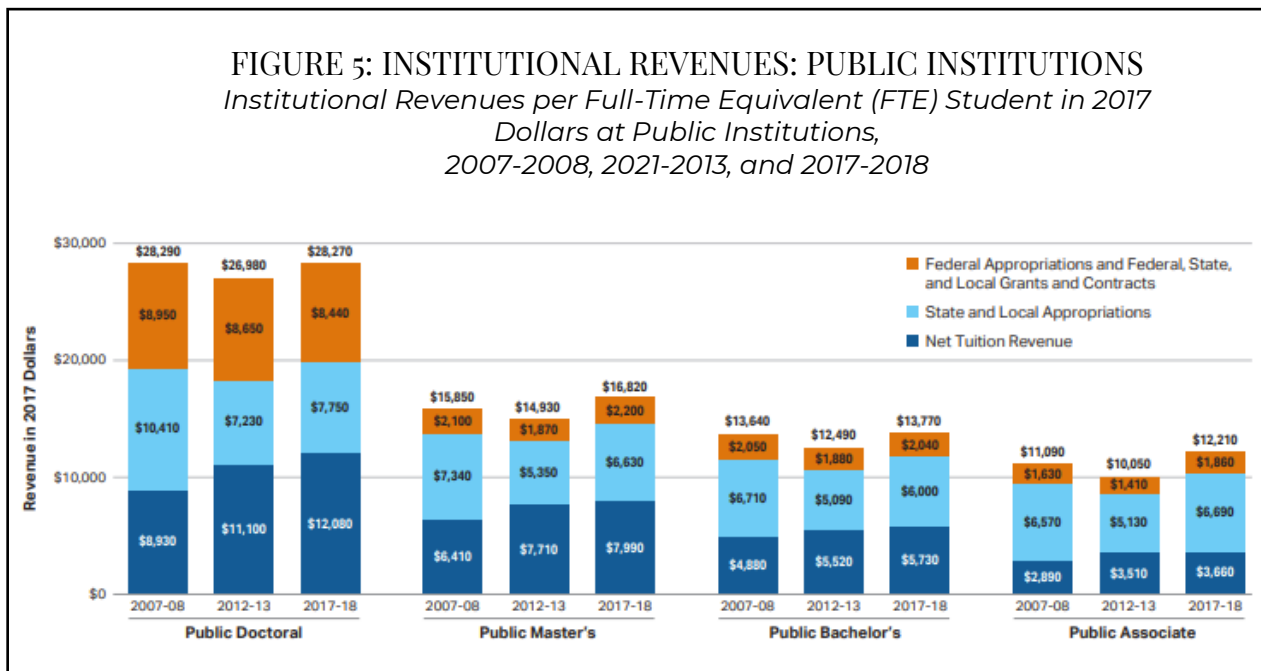
The case for free community college is too often made using rhetoric built on shaky foundations. It is thus worthwhile assessing what we know to be true about America’s community college system and what free community college would accomplish versus what its advocates to promise. The table, evidence, data below support some of the frequently mentioned misconceptions.

| FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISCONCEPTIONS | |
|---|-------|
| U.S. higher education funding and attainment are below that of other developed countries. | FALSE |
| Free community college is a cost-effective fix to the college debt crisis. | FALSE |
| Free community college is a guaranteed way to improve educational quality and attainment. | FALSE |
| Free community college is an equitable way to address rising higher education costs. | FALSE |
| Free community college is necessary effectively to promote family-sustaining careers. | FALSE |

FALSE: U.S. higher education funding and attainment are below that of other developed countries.

The United States spends more than any developed country on higher education. In the 2018–2019 school year, the United States spent \$632 billion on higher education ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2019](#)). In 2017, America spent the second most per full-time equivalent student on postsecondary education among all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations (behind only Luxembourg) at \$34,500 compared to the OECD average of \$17,100. As a share of the economy, this spending amounts to 2.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the U.S. versus only 1.4 percent for the OECD average ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)). Much of this funding comes from public sources, with states allocating about one-third of their budgets to higher education. Public funding is already dominant at the community college level, with 70 percent of two-year college revenues from federal, state, and local governments and only 30 percent coming from tuition ([College Board, 2020](#)). Among the different levels of government, the local level contributes the most to community colleges ([Urban Institute,](#)

2018). **Figure 5** provides a breakdown of institutional revenues for public institutions for fiscal years 2007–2008, 2012–2013, and 2017–2018 ([College Board, 2020](#)).



The U.S. also has higher postsecondary attainment than many other countries, with 48 percent of Americans aged 25-to-64 possessing a postsecondary degree compared to the OECD average of 38 percent. Moreover, only five countries in the OECD—Korea, Israel, Japan, Luxembourg, and Canada—have rates above 50 percent ([Zhang et al., 2021](#)) ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)).

FALSE: Free community college is a cost-effective fix to the college debt crisis.

Many act as if free college is a cure-all to the student debt crisis but swapping private student debt for higher taxes or greater government debt does nothing to address underlying shortcomings in the higher education system and fails to put the United States on a sounder financial footing. As discussed earlier, high dropout rates and poor labor market outcomes are some of the most important drivers of default. Without reforms to meaningfully improve education quality, taxpayers will be on the hook for paying the higher education bills of college dropouts, and the U.S. may see little change in educational attainment ([Hedlund, 2019](#)) ([Caucutt & Kumar, 2003](#)) ([Athreya, Kartik & Eberly, 2021](#)).

FALSE: Free community college is a guaranteed way to increase quality and educational attainment.

Community college is already an inexpensive gateway to receiving an education beyond high school. The dilemma is primarily not bringing down costs but improving quality that drives graduation rates and post-graduation labor market success. Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, research indicates that free community college can *reduce* 4-year college completion rates by diverting students into lower-quality institutions. Instead, programs like Tennessee Promise demonstrate the importance of mentorship and providing students with a sense of ownership over their education. Giving students some skin-in-the-game can

increase this sense of ownership. The success of England's recent moves away from free higher education exemplifies this point. In response to the introduction of tuition, fees, and an income-contingent loan system, higher education in England has seen increased per-student funding, higher enrollment, and a shrinking participation gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students ([Murphy, Scott-Clayton & Wyness, 2018](#)) ([Murphy, Scott-Clayton & Wyness, 2017](#)).

FALSE: Federally-funded free community college would treat states equally.

Community college tuition varies widely across the states, implying that any federally-funded free community college effort would likely entail wide disparities in the number of federal taxpayer dollars distributed to each state. For example, California has the Nation's largest community college system, which is already affordable to a broad range of students. Because of taxpayer-financed state subsidies, students pay \$552 per 12-credit semester while low-income students face zero tuition costs. On the other hand, Vermont has a more expensive community college tuition rate of \$3,360.

Under the [America's College Promise Act](#) led by Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin and California Representative Mike Levin, the federal government would match state spending on community colleges on a \$3-for-\$1 basis. However, to get the funding, states must eliminate community college tuition. Thus, states like California that already heavily subsidize community college tuition would get dramatically more federal money than Vermont and other states with above-average tuition. In particular, while California would get the full \$3 for every \$1 they commit in state funding, Vermont would only receive 23 cents.

FALSE: Free community college is necessary effectively to promote family-sustaining careers.

"As the workforce engines of their communities, community colleges have important roles to play in drawing more explicit connections between education and the workforce to equip students with the skills the 21st-century demands." – [American Association for Community Colleges, 2018](#)

Historically speaking, community colleges have provided non-traditional, alternative, or career-oriented programs for students seeking a broad range of job prospects. Traditionally, community colleges have often focused on providing certificates or associate's degrees, but the growing prominence and appeal of apprenticeships over the past few years have drawn community colleges into taking on a larger role in providing technical skills necessary for many in-demand careers. To get a sense of scale, in 2018, over 30 million good-paying jobs were available that did not require a bachelor's degree ([Good Jobs Data, 2016](#)). This may be emblematic of the disconnect between skills taught at colleges versus those required by employers, as confirmed by a survey from New America ([Fishman, Ekowo & Ezeugo, 2017](#)). Similarly, the National Federation of Independent Businesses found that 89 percent of their surveyed employers had major labor quality hiring issues in 2018.

Without succumbing to the false promise of free college, the Trump Administration took on the challenge of addressing the skills gap by championing several efforts in the public and private sectors to boost skills-based hiring conducive to family-sustaining careers. Specifically, the Department of Labor (DOL) expanded to new and emerging industries and established Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship Programs (IRAPs). IRAPs are high-quality apprenticeship programs that provide necessary and relevant workplace skills-based

training and opportunities for job seekers or individuals looking to advance their skills. These federal efforts by DOL led to the creation of Expanding Community College Apprenticeships (ECCA) under the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). This program, funded by DOL, has set a goal of training over 16,000 apprentices over the next 16 years. Even with the onset of the pandemic, AACC met 85 percent of its first-year goal by June 2021 ([American Association of Community Colleges, 2021](#)).

PRACTICAL STEPS TO IMPROVING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The Trump Administration recognized the importance of community colleges and their role in providing our workforce with the skills necessary for upward mobility. In response to the record number of people coming off of the sidelines and into the workforce in 2019 ([The White House, 2018](#)), President Trump established the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board led by former Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and former Senior Advisor to the President Ivanka Trump. This advisory board, comprised of private sector leaders, bipartisan government officials, and leaders of educational institutions, put together a robust plan to create sustainable opportunities for the American workforce. For example, the Trump Administration doubled the number of colleges and states that can participate in the Second-Chance Pell Experiment, initially created in 2015 under the Obama Administration ([U.S. Department of Education, 2015](#)), leading to the permanent repeal of the decades-old ban allowing incarcerated Americans to receive the education and skills necessary to secure employment upon re-entry to society in December of 2020 ([Weissman, 2020](#)). In addition, the Trump Administration implemented reforms that allowed community college graduates to break free from the stranglehold of credentialism, be more mobile with their careers, and leverage their skills in a wider array of venues. For instance, in July 2020, at the recommendation of the National Council for the American Worker, through [Executive Order 13932](#), federal agencies were directed to reevaluate their hiring practice to replace degree-based hiring with skills-based hiring to make the job process more equitable and meritorious, taking into account skills attained through alternative pathways ([2020](#)). The Trump Administration also issued occupational licensing reform principles encouraging state leaders to eliminate barriers to employment, particularly for military spouses and returning citizens. Finally, President Trump signed the [FUTURE Act](#), which did the following ([2018](#)):

1. Permanently funded \$255 million annually Historically Black Colleges and Universities for the first time in U.S. history.
2. Increased funding for the federal Pell Grant program that provides direct financial assistance to low-income students.
3. Reversed a decades-old ban on Second Chance Pell programs to provide postsecondary education to incarcerated individuals to expand their skills so they may better succeed in the workforce upon re-entry.

Efforts like these pave a practical pathway to improving community colleges. Rather than upending the whole community college system with experimental progressive policies, leaders would do students and communities a service by advancing evidence-based priorities that build on the strengths already present in the community college system—its accessibility, affordability, and flexibility to address the evolving economic needs of the private sector. Below are some priorities states should keep in mind when pursuing reforms and allocating funding:

- Workforce development programs should leverage industry leaders in the private sector to advise and provide the best tools and curriculum that are applicable to the jobs that exist in their state and communities.
- Programs should provide meaningful on-the-job training opportunities that could lead to full-time employment.
- Programs should provide the necessary technical skills and training that prepare students for the workforce and remain innovative to keep up with existing jobs.
- Academic courses should prepare their students to pursue a degree beyond community college.

There are several community colleges whose success in preparing students for the workforce can serve as a model for others. One example is the Alabama Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education (F.A.M.E.) Advanced Manufacturing Technician Program (AMT) at Calhoun Community College, where students can earn a technical associate's degree in advanced manufacturing. This well-known program is offered at many community colleges across the Nation and is overseen by the National Association of Manufacturers. This private sector engagement has enabled F.A.M.E. students to receive work experience over 2 years of attending college and can even earning up to \$33,500, which could cover most, if not all, of their community college expenses. These programs are highly sought after and are a great example of how community colleges can educate and set students up for success in a cost-effective way.

CONCLUSION

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." – Benjamin Franklin

This quote remains true today. However, investment does not mean simply pouring more taxpayer money into programs. A wise investment requires accountability, diligence, and a commitment to improving quality to ensure a sound return on taxpayer resources. Community colleges play a critical role in shaping the economic fortunes of millions of Americans by equipping them with the skills for success in a rapidly evolving economy. States have demonstrated success in pioneering innovative models to modernize their community college systems. Free college is an unwelcome and harmful distraction from further needed reforms to improve quality to drive better outcomes.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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