

Should College Be Free?

The rising cost of tuition and related ballooning of student loan debt has brought the expense of college education to the top of the political debate. The Democratic Platform and Hillary Clinton have a plan that would eliminate in-state tuition at public universities for families earning less than \$125,000 per year (The GOP Platform has no such plan). We are a long way from this or any other plan becoming a reality, but we welcome the discussion about making higher education more affordable for families.

Should college be free for all who qualify? Of course free does not mean that there are no costs, rather it refers to who pays for it. The question is, should costs be shared by all taxpayers or should those who use it shoulder the costs? Over the past 30 years we have gradually gone towards the latter system. As states have slashed funding, tuition has gone up and the costs of higher education is now shouldered by students and their families. This was not always the case.

In the 1960s California offered free college tuition to all residents. Even though by the mid-1970s students were assessed a small tuition, about \$630 in 1975-1976, the residents of California enjoyed a remarkable period in higher education whereby students could be part of a world-class educational experience at virtually no cost. Other states followed suit so that, for example, in the early 1970s tuition at Michigan State University was just \$450 per year.

Two generations of students participated in what many argue is the greatest higher education system in the world, and they did so without accruing massive debt. By the end of the 20th century this dream of affordable, accessible, high quality higher education for all who qualify has been all but lost. We have gone down the wrong path but thankfully it is reversible. In fact, some states and cities have even gone back to the California system of the 1970s.

The “Kalamazoo Promise” is perhaps the most exciting tuition program. Students attending the Kalamazoo Public Schools receive a scholarship for tuition and fees at any public college or university in Michigan. The “Tennessee Promise” provides a scholarship for tuition at any community or technical college in the State. These Promise Programs and those who propose increased federal funding for public schools realize the importance of post-secondary education for their citizens.

These programs reflect the belief that higher education is a public good and it is needed more than ever to be a productive citizen and realize the American Dream. Here a few reasons why.

--The current pay-as-you-go system promotes economic inequality. When only the wealthiest of American families can pay for college education without accruing significant debt, the result is less-wealthy families do not send their kids to college or they accrue burdensome debt.

--Shifting college costs to families undermines economic mobility. Education, and in particular higher education, is an important part of the American Dream. The Department of Treasury reports that an individual with a college degree is 75% more likely to move to a higher income bracket than their parents. Many of us would not be where we are today if we did not have access to affordable, high-quality higher education.

--College education is the economic engine that pushes our economy forward. A worker with a bachelor's degree earns significantly more than a person with a high school diploma and the unemployment rate is significantly lower for those with a college education.

--America was founded, in part, on the idea that education is the foundation of democracy. In the mid to late 1800s many of our finest public universities (e.g., University of Arizona, University of Illinois, Ohio State, and the University of Maryland) in every state in the union were funded by the Morrill Act, which gave states Federal land to sell (land grants) to establish these fine institutions. Our leaders have long realized the link between a vibrant democracy and access to education.

What makes America great? The American Dream, which is made possible by affordable, high quality college education.

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The Pantagraph, Aug 21st, 2016

http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/columns/guest-commentary-should-college-be-free/article_e0e4b5ec-c834-587f-9c15-659130529cd5.html