

Focusing in on College Completion: How Biden's Higher Ed Proposals Deliver for Students



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President Biden's proposal to invest \$62 billion in completion and retention initiatives at colleges and universities serving large shares of low-income students represents a sea change in federal higher education policy, shifting the focus from access alone towards completion and comprehensive student success. This is an evolution that both American voters and students have wanted for a long time—and for good reason. Right now, 40% of students who start college haven't finished six years later. And 3 in 4 low-income students attend broad access institutions that have to operate with significantly fewer resources per student than the highly selective institutions that serve students with less need. The time is ripe to address these inequities through a large and long overdue federal investment in student success across all sectors of higher education.

As recent public opinion research conducted by Third Way and New America underscores, students and voters say they want the federal government to focus on completion, value, and accountability

rather than solely on front-end affordability fixes. In short, the American people want to make sure students don't just go to college, but that they finish. Here's what they had to say:

- A [2020 Third Way poll](#) showed a strong desire for policymakers to focus on completion. In fact, 58% of voters said that “ensuring students complete college and receive their degree” is very important to them. And they want completion to be a focus for President Biden, too—as more than half (52%) thought “tying federal aid to student outcomes like graduation rates and earnings” should be a top priority for the incoming administration.
- Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, likely voters have come to place an even [higher premium on both value and accountability](#). “Making higher education affordable and ensuring it provides a good value to students” was considered a top priority of 63% of voters in June 2020, compared to only 55% who felt this way four months prior. And at the [end of 2020](#), 42% of likely voters stated that improving the value of higher education is *more important* to their vote than it was in previous years.
- Signaling a growing push for both accountability and improved student outcomes, a [2021 New America poll](#) found that 40% of Americans strongly support the idea that “colleges and universities should lose some access to taxpayer dollars” if they have low graduation rates.
- Even [Democratic voters](#) feel strongly that making college pay off and delivering strong student outcomes should be prioritized over making it free. Nearly 60% of Democrats said that “making higher education affordable and ensuring it provides a good value to students” should be a top priority for the president, while only 40% thought that “making higher education free” should be a primary focus for the administration.
- And new investment in evidence-based initiatives that will help today's students persist and complete their degrees couldn't be more timely. Among students currently enrolled in higher education, 37% are over the age of 25, 40% are attending college part-time, 34% are first-generation, 24% are student parents, 31% are low-income, and 64% are working full-time while they attend. These students need wraparound supports to ensure they can complete their education and gain the degrees they need to be successful in today's economy.

The federal government has made important strides toward improving access and affordability for students in higher education, and we're glad to see President Biden make meaningful front-end investments in the nation's students. But we know that we can no longer focus only on getting students *to* college. Getting *through* college is what counts and will help set them up for longer term success. This new proposed investment in retention and completion by the Biden Administration will put us one step closer to meeting this goal. It's not just a policy winner, but a political winner too.

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