

How to Talk about Higher Education



Tamara Hiler

Deputy Director of Education

[@TamaraHiler](https://twitter.com/TamaraHiler)



Lanae Erickson

Senior Vice President for the Social Policy & Politics Program

[@LanaeErickson](https://twitter.com/LanaeErickson)



Wesley Whistle

Former Education Policy Advisor

[@WesleyWhistle](https://twitter.com/WesleyWhistle)

By 2020, two-thirds of all US jobs will require education beyond high school.¹ That means the demand for postsecondary education as a crucial path to earning a good life will only increase in the decades to come. It also means being able to access affordable and high-quality postsecondary options will remain a salient issue for American voters as they look to ensure that our rapidly changing economy doesn't leave them or their children behind. To feel better equipped to discuss this important topic with voters, this primer lays out the following items: key things you need to know about our higher education system today; an outline of ideas you can propose to increase higher education's value for students and taxpayers; and pitfalls to avoid as you talk about higher education on the campaign trail. For more information on any of the content presented here, please contact Tamara Hiler at thiler@thirdway.org or (202) 467-6645.

What You Should Know About Higher Education

Key Facts

- Today's **college students are more diverse than any previous generation**. More than one-third of students are 25 years or older, nearly one-quarter of students are parents, and two-thirds of students work while attending school.
- For decades, we had a deal that if you worked a minimum wage job and got a Pell Grant, you could afford the cost of college, yet **that deal has fallen apart**. The Pell Grant used to cover 80% of college costs at a public four-year college, but today, it covers less than a third.
- **We have a leaky pipeline in higher education**, as only half of all students who start college earn a degree. This is a major problem since students who don't finish college are **three times as likely to default** on their loans.
- College should be a ladder out of poverty, but **the system is failing lower-income students**. Today, fewer than 15% of low-income students get a four-year degree, while more than 6 in 10 wealthy students do.

General Narrative

Voter concerns about increasing college tuition and rising student debt have escalated over the last few years, catapulting issues surrounding higher education directly into the national spotlight. That's why numerous candidates have already started to champion much-needed efforts to reduce college costs and protect students from predatory institutions who convince them to take out substantial federal loans and leave them with little to nothing to show for it. Yet cost is only half of the conversation, especially when many of the most popular reforms on the table today—such as refinancing student loans or free college—would disproportionately benefit students who come from wealthier backgrounds and do little for the ones who need help the most. Research has found that loan defaults are most common for students who have the least amount of debt—typically \$5-10k—in large part because they started college but were never able to earn degrees that could help them find

decent-paying jobs. **That's why candidates should extend the conversation from one that focuses narrowly on *cost* to one that more broadly focuses on *value*.** This includes ensuring that all students who enter into the higher education system earn a diploma or certificate and have the skills they need to be competitive in a 21st century economy. It also means making sure no student is made worse off by the institution or program they attend, and that both students *and* taxpayers see a return on the massive investment they make in higher education today.

Latest Polling

While political reform and the economy remain the two most important problems facing the country according to voters heading into the midterm elections, education—and most importantly, the pathway it provides to lower unemployment and higher wages—continues to be an important kitchen table issue for most American voters.² This remains true despite the newly pervasive—and incorrect—narrative that higher education is no longer worth its cost. In fact, recent surveys have found that across party lines, an overwhelming majority of Americans value higher education, in large part because they know college is the clearest pathway to getting a good job that will result in a more stable and secure life.³ Additionally, a recent poll from Third Way found that nearly two-thirds of registered voters believe that national leaders do not spend enough time on higher education, which is why greater federal oversight of colleges and universities is necessary to ensure students are coming out of higher education prepared for the workforce.⁴

What You Can Propose to Improve Higher Education

Proactive Agenda: A College Value Guarantee

Access to a quality degree or certificate beyond high school has become a prerequisite for economic success in our modern economy. Yet each year, taxpayers pour billions of

dollars into a system that does little to prevent students from attending institutions that fail to provide a value-add or a viable path to economic success. Today, half of students who start college don't get a degree and, at the average institution, one-third of students don't earn more than a high school graduate and one in five students don't earn enough to repay their loans. These are unacceptable outcomes given that postsecondary education is one of the largest investments a student and their family will ever make.

To ensure students and taxpayers get a solid return on their higher education investment, we need a new College Value Guarantee that will take substantial steps to make college more affordable and accessible for all students, as well as protect students from attending schools that leave them worse off. This guarantee should include:

- Setting new federal bottom lines that prohibit colleges with abysmal graduation rates, post-enrollment earnings, and/or repayment rates from having access to federal student aid.
- Holding institutions accountable for how well they provide a return on investment for students and requiring those who fail to improve to pay back a portion of the federal funds they receive to the government, defrauded students, or other institutions doing their part to serve high-needs populations.
- Today, young people can easily pull up data to help them decide what movie is worth watching, but they don't have the data they need to make one of the most important financial decisions of their lives: which college to attend. We must improve the transparency of our higher education system so that students and parents can better determine whether a school is actually worth its cost.

Defensive Agenda: Protect Existing Consumer Protections in Higher Education

Since Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos took office in February 2017, she has made every effort to reverse course on higher education rules meant to protect students and ensure taxpayers are getting a return on their higher education investment. In the short time she has been in office, Secretary DeVos has delayed a rule allowing states to oversee the quality of distance education programs that serve students in their jurisdiction, weakened rules providing loan forgiveness to students defrauded by predatory institutions, and gutted protections requiring career programs accessing federal grants and loans to show that their students are gainfully employed after graduating. But she's not done. Her latest efforts to roll back key consumer protections include allowing institutions to inflate the value of college courses, removing a requirement for professors to regularly engage and interact with students, further weakening accreditation standards, and continuing to limit the oversight role and function of states in higher education.

While these regulations all may seem very technical, dismantling them would instantly undermine the government's ability to protect consumers from higher education programs at all colleges that promise students a return on their investment and never deliver. To protect students and taxpayers from waste, fraud, and abuse and guarantee a basic level of quality in programs that have access to taxpayer funds, efforts must be made to uphold the few key consumer protections we already have in higher education. This includes:

- Strengthening—not weakening—the accreditation system so that the watchdogs in charge of monitoring quality assurance only allow institutions with credible outcomes to have access to financial aid.
- Upholding states' rights to protect their residents from paying for programs that fail to provide students with the skills they need to enter the workforce and pay back their loans.

- Securing the rights of students to recoup the time and money they spent attending fraudulent programs that lied to them and left them worse off than if they had never attended at all.

Policy and Messaging Pitfalls to Avoid on the Campaign Trail

Use caution before jumping on the “free college” bandwagon.

The promise of providing free college for all might be a good soundbite to attract the attention of young voters, but a closer look reveals that it does little to address some of the more pressing systemic issues plaguing higher education today. Specifically:

- **Free college plans are expensive and are not an efficient use of limited funds.** The estimated costs of free college proposals currently on the table in Congress range anywhere from \$47 billion to \$97 billion *per year*, nearly 2x-3x more than what the federal government spends on Pell grants targeted to low- and moderate-income students each year.⁵ In fact, this kind of investment would be enough to provide an additional 16 million Pell Grant awards at the maximum level to students each year—a significantly more targeted way to spend limited federal resources.⁶ It’s also important to note that free college programs do not address the non-tuition costs of attending college that are often the biggest barriers for low-income students. There are much more effective ways to spend that money to improve affordability and access for the students who need it the most. A recent Brookings analysis found, “that the money it would cost to cover tuition costs for the top two income quartiles would be more than enough money to eliminate tuition and cover *all other college costs* for the bottom income quartile.”⁷

- **Free college plans are regressive and could actually hurt access to college for marginalized students.** A look at existing state programs shows that well-intentioned free college programs can have serious unintended consequences. For example, Tennessee enacted free community college but gave no additional funds to the low-income students whose tuition was already covered by the Pell Grant.⁸ Instead, the state's program ended up giving high-income students \$1,500 to pay for tuition even though they could already afford it. In addition, white and Asian students are the most likely to benefit in savings from free-tuition plans, with black, Latino, and Native American student populations benefiting the least, especially if free tuition plans cause public university systems to become more selective and less accessible to all students.⁹
- **Voters are wary of free college.** Public opinion research has found that an overwhelming majority of voters on both sides of the aisle do not think free college is a viable solution to improve our country's higher education system. A recent poll commissioned by the Congressional Progressive Caucus found that a message to expand financial aid was 18 percentage points more popular than a free college message, even with progressive voters.¹⁰

Avoid talking about a binary choice of “college” and “non-college” options.

As the popularity of workforce development, apprenticeships, and vocational programs continue to gain steam as part of the larger national conversation on postsecondary preparation for the 21st century economy, be cognizant of pitting the “traditional” four-year college pathway against its more “non-traditional” counterpart. Doing so perpetuates unhelpful assumptions and increases your chances of alienating the parents and students navigating the higher education system today (who are on average older, more racially diverse, and more financially independent than ever before). Specifically:

- **“College” no longer has one, singular meaning.** There is a disconnect between the way DC elites and policymakers think about “college” and the way the vast majority of American families actually experience college today. It is no longer helpful to talk about vocational schools, two-year schools, and four-year schools as being something wholly separate from one another—especially as a growing number of students enter, leave, and return to postsecondary education at various points in their lives as a way to keep their skills relevant in today’s rapidly changing economy. Instead, talk about the panoply of options for education beyond high school as a dynamic system that students can enter and exit and experience at multiple touchpoints throughout the course of their lives, not as a divergent pathway requiring students to make a singular choice upfront about attending either a two-year or certificate program OR a four-year institution.
- **Pitting certain postsecondary training options against others can trigger unhelpful conversations about who should or shouldn’t go to college.** When talking about the need to expand higher education options outside of the four-year realm, there is a real risk of spurring insulting discussions about “tracking,” or which kinds of students should be taking which pathway. While the reality is that not all students will attend a four-year program, people too often make assumptions about who “those students” are, which is counterproductive to achieving equity in higher education and ensuring marginalized students have access to the full panoply of choices in the system.

Don’t narrowly define all quality problems in higher education as only for-profit problems.

While there are serious concerns about the credibility and quality of education provided at many for-profit colleges (i.e. the now-defunct ITT Technical Institutes and Corinthian Colleges are clear examples of fraudulent behavior and abysmal outcomes affecting millions of students), it is

important to remember that there is a need for improved federal oversight and accountability for student outcomes across the entire higher education system. Specifically:

- **There are bad actors across all sectors.** Unfortunately, institutions and programs that defraud students and leave them worse off than if they'd never stepped foot in a higher education classroom exist beyond the for-profit industry. Take, for example, Northwestern Polytechnic University, a non-profit institution under scrutiny for taking millions in federal financial aid to serve primarily as a visa mill for foreign students.¹¹ Or the 344 non-profit and public programs that failed the Gainful Employment rule because their students consistently failed to make enough money post-graduation to be able to pay their loans back. The reality is that there are bad actors producing abysmal student outcomes across our higher education system, and the federal government should protect students and taxpayers from wasting money at *any* program that fails to produce results, regardless of its sector.
- **Greater oversight and accountability for all schools will capture nefarious behavior at for-profit colleges.** Although there are some additional rules and oversight needed at programs that profit off students and federal financial aid, greater oversight across the entirety of our higher education system will also serve to help protect students from predatory for-profit programs. That's because for-profit colleges historically have the worst outcomes for students. While only 19% of borrowers attend for-profit schools, those students represent 38% of those who default on their student loans.¹² In addition, ensuring that all institutions accessing federal tax dollars are providing value to students will allow us to uncover equity gaps at institutions that may be serving their overall population well but leaving certain demographics of students behind.

ENDNOTES

1. Carnevale, Anthony, Nicole Smith, & Jeff Strohl. “The College Payoff.” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2014, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
2. “Most Important Problem.” Poll, *Gallup*, Aug. 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
3. Fishman, Rachel, Ernest Ezeugo, & Sophie Nguyen. “Varying Degrees 2018.” *New America*, 21 May 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/varying-degrees-2018/americans-believe-well-paying-jobs-require-education-after-high-school/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018. See also: “Most Americans Support Post-Secondary Education.” *Civis Analytics*, Nov. 2017, https://www.civisanalytics.com/uploads/2017/11/Civis_Analytics_Higher_Education_Polling_Memo.pdf. Accessed September 11, 2018. See also: Carnevale, Anthony, Stephen Rose, & Ban Cheah. “The College Payoff.” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2014, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
4. Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 3,000 general population interviews between July 20 and July 29, 2018 on behalf of Third Way. Findings not released publicly.

5. "Beyond Tuition." Center for American Progress, 20 Jun. 2018,
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2018/06/20/451899/beyond-tuition/>. Accessed September 11, 2018. See also: Kelchen, Robert. "A Look at Pell Grant Recipients' Graduation Rates." Brookings, 25 Oct. 2017,
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/10/25/a-look-at-pell-grant-recipients-graduation-rates/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
6. "Pell Grant Maximum for 2018-19 Announced." Federal Student Aid, United States Department of Education, 2018,
<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/announcements/pell-2018-19>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
7. Chingos, Matthew. "Who Would Benefit Most From Free College?." Brookings, 21 Apr. 2016,
<https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-would-benefit-most-from-free-college/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
8. Poutre, Alan and Mamie Voight. "The State of Free College: Tennessee Promise and New York's Excelsior Scholarship." Institute for Higher Education Policy, Sept. 2018, <http://www.ihep.org/press/news-releases/new-ihep-research-finds-new-york-tennessee-state-free-college-programs-fall>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
9. Dancy, Kim and Iris Palmer. "Fix Free College." New America, 7 Sept. 2016,
<http://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/fix-free-college-1/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018. See also: "Our Best Estimate on the Enrollment Effects of Clinton's Free College Proposal." Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 31 Aug. 2016,
https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/memo%20Clinton%20plan.pdf. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.

- 10.** Poll. Progressive Caucus, 20 Mar 2018,
<https://weareprogressives.org/progressive-caucus-pac-leaders-lake-research-partners-leading-progressive-organizations-held-press-call-highlight-popularity-progressive-policies-2018-battleground-congressional-d/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
- 11.** Hensley-Clancy, Molly. "Inside the College That Abolished The F And Raked In The Cash." *Buzzfeed News*, 26 May 2016.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mollyhensleyclancy/inside-the-school-that-abolished-the-f-and-raked-in-the-cash>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.
- 12.** Miller, Ben. "Who Are Student Loan Defaulters?." Center for American Progress, 14 Dec. 2017,
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2017/12/14/444011/student-loan-defaulters/>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.