

Free Tuition in Higher Education

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Abstract

Given the context of higher education institutions more consistently raising their tuition fees, this essay seeks to examine whether college tuition ought to be free or if making college tuition free is unfeasible. Though some individuals argue that it is impossible for society to relieve itself completely of the inequity of access to education, many others have sought various solutions that may help to resolve this issue. One solution to this problem is to increase the size of Pell Grants to give many more students the opportunity to attend and receive a degree from an institution of higher education.

Keywords

Free college tuition

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Suggested citation:

Millon, J. (2021). Insert title of the article. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 108-110.

Over time, higher educational institutions have been exponentially raising their tuition prices. These institutions are becoming more dependent on college tuition income so that the budgets it takes to operate an institution can become more balanced (Rusk & Leslie, 1978). The controversy of making higher education at public institutions free is a prevalent topic of debate in the United States, especially in democratic debates. For example, Elizabeth Warren argues not only that public college tuition should be free, but also that student debt should be cancelled (Kreighbaum, 2019). Many opponents to free college tuition do not believe that making such a drastic change in the public education system would be fiscally feasible, while proponents charge administrative leaders to make their schools more equitable for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

To fully understand this problem, one must recognize how the United States made it to the position that it is in now. Rosenberg (2019) very strongly believes that given the complexity of issues such as racism and policy, wealthy individuals are favored; thus, “there is no simple way to deal with the problem of inequality of access to education in the United States” (para. 13). Winograd & Staisloff (2016) also raise some concerns about making public higher education tuition free. They urge that although such a policy change would call for more “streamlined and efficient administrative services,” this change would result in a lack of small class settings, “fewer degree programs. . . [and] less research at non-research institutions” (p. 981). Davidson (2015) even proposes that a potential solution to these access difficulties, specifically at elite institutions, would be to raise tuition prices since the money that wealthy students provide from paying full tuition allows for more aid. Essentially, these individuals argue that free tuition would do an exceptionally larger amount of harm than good.

Winograd and Staisloff (2016) suggest that there is no better time than now to make college tuition free, so that the United States can prepare to have competent individuals in the workforce. They express that such a change would require a major investment by the government; however, “America has always used government resources to provide sufficient funds to those willing and able to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to be successful” (Winograd & Staisloff, 2016, p. 981). They continue this point by stating that the United States would benefit from the expansion of state funds from primary and secondary to post-secondary education. Ultimately, this argument not only focuses on the positive outcome for students who were not previously afforded the opportunity to even consider attending college, but also preparing the future generation to be the leaders of the United States. Dynarski et al. (2018) also present a study that shows that the cost of tuition may explain the gap between high-achieving, low-income students compared to high-achieving, upper-income students. One way to close this tangible, extreme gap would be to alleviate the financial burden of college tuition.

Access to a collegiate education should not be limited simply to students who have the financial means of paying for the increasingly high tuition rates. I believe that to make education a more equitable and attainable system for folks with financial difficulties, these financial boundaries should be alleviated. This would allow a wider variety of individuals to have the opportunity to attend college, should they choose to explore this option. While some individuals are concerned that making public higher education tuition free will harm students by creating worse learning environments, the United States education system is not equitable and does not give all students a fair chance at receiving a college education. Rosenberg (2019) mentions a proposal for a policy change that he believes is more feasible: increase the size of the federal Pell Grant (Rosenberg, 2019). Not only would increasing the Pell Grant make tuition much more affordable and feasible for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but it would also be a cheaper solution compared to making college tuition free. The solution discussed, or solutions like it, will help the education system in the United States become more equitable, thus, alleviating some of the financial and emotional burdens of students who desire to complete post-secondary education.

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