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American Commonwealth Partnership



>> Shaping Our Future

How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want?

HIGHER EDUCATION'S BENEFITS for the students who attend the nation's 4,643 colleges and universities are well known. People with two-year and four-year college degrees earn more and are less likely to lose their jobs during an economic downturn. Nearly 9 in 10 Americans say that young people are better off going to college after high school than they would be going directly to work.

But beyond its individual benefits, we have looked to higher education throughout our history to help us collectively create the kind of society we want and to advance the country's economic, political, and social progress. For example, when soldiers returned home from World War II,

Congress passed the GI bill, providing money for them to attend college. The GI bill helped individual soldiers build good lives for themselves, but it also gave the United States the best-educated workforce in the world—one that propelled the country's astonishing post-war economic growth.

Higher education has historically enjoyed broad public support. Until recently, most state legislatures regularly increased support for public colleges and universities. Most students and families believed their own investment in higher education was bound to pay off. But now, as concerns about higher education and the country's future mushroom, there are considerably more questions about those pay-offs.

This issue guide asks: What should we expect of higher education today when it comes to the nation? What could colleges and universities, including community colleges, trade and vocational schools, and other such institutions do to help us create the society we want? For most people, three areas seem especially troubling.

- **The US economy is struggling.** It's not creating enough good jobs; middle-class incomes are lagging; and we face tough economic competition throughout the world, especially in science and technology.
- **We've become a divided nation and a "me-first" society.** For many Americans, ethical principles like responsibility and integrity are fading, and people seem concerned only for themselves—not for the community or for the country as a whole. In Washington and on Main Street, too many of us are unwilling to compromise or work together to get problems solved.
- **Our country is becoming less fair.** We say this is the land of equal opportunity, but too many people who work hard and play by the rules are slipping out of the middle class. And too many poor youngsters never get a fair chance in the first place.

These are all deeply complicated, multifaceted problems, and no one pretends that colleges and universities alone can solve them. Families, public schools, government, business, philanthropy, and other sectors also need to make changes to address them. But higher education could play a stronger role in these areas.

Taking a Closer Look at Higher Education Itself

Many people are asking tough questions about how well higher education is functioning, and many say it needs to make changes. What are the problems?

- **Public trust in higher education is declining.** Nearly half of Americans say their state's college system needs a fundamental overhaul, and a majority says colleges care less about their educational mission than they do about the bottom line.

- **Tuition costs are rising.** Tuition has been rising faster than inflation, and the typical college senior graduates with about \$25,000 in college debt. A Pew Research Center survey shows that only about one American in five believes that "most people can afford to pay for a college education."

- **Higher education's "promise" is under siege.** In the past, if you put in the time, effort, and money to get a degree, you were almost assured of a sound economic future. Too often, that's no longer true.

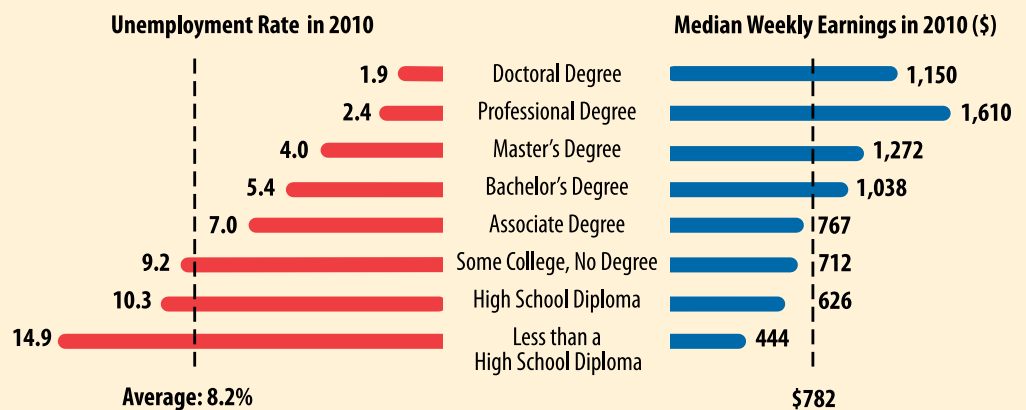
- **Some people wonder whether we've made "going to college" too important.** Many Americans also say employers too often demand college degrees for jobs that don't really require them. Some believe that the economy and many young people themselves would be better off if we improved vocational training rather than assuming that almost everyone should go to college.

A Framework for Deliberation

The diverse system of US higher education—including public and private universities, smaller four-year independent colleges, two-year community colleges, for-profit schools, and others—already serves a number of important social purposes. But this guide focuses on the future. It takes up this fundamental question: *How should higher education help us create the society we want?* It offers three options to consider, each with benefits as well as drawbacks.

While it's certainly possible for higher education to pursue multiple goals, it's also true that colleges and universities can't do everything. To be effective, they need to focus their energies and set priorities. As we envision higher education in the future, there are options and trade-offs, and it's important to think and talk about them with our fellow citizens. By doing so, we can begin to make tough choices about what higher education can and should be expected to do.

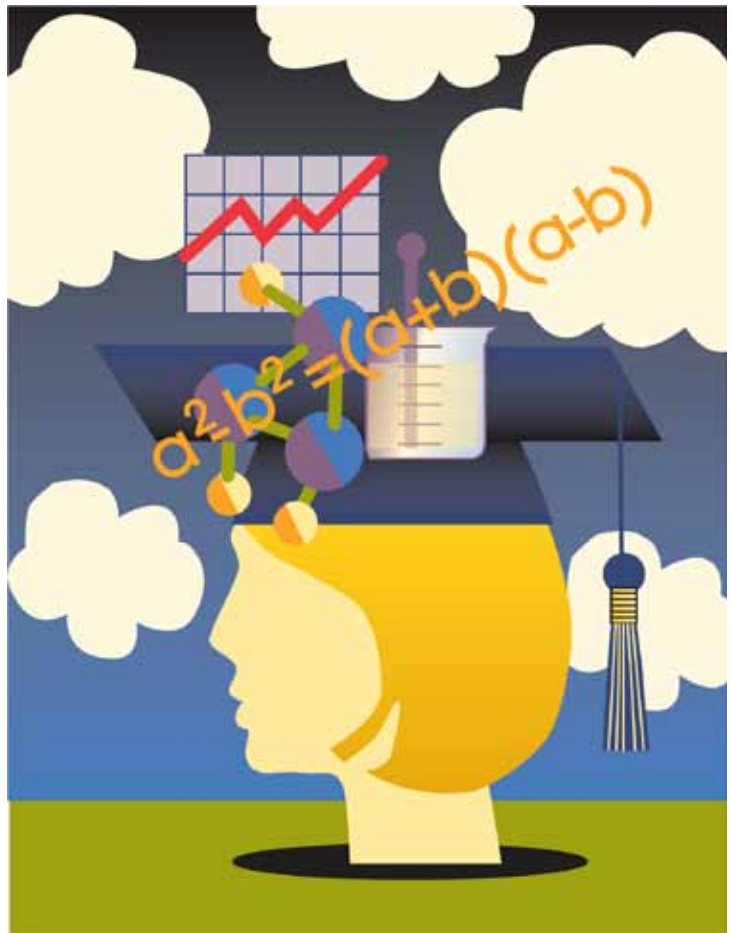
Education Pays



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

OPTION ONE

Higher education should help ensure that our economy remains competitive in a tough global marketplace—and that means recapturing our lead in science and technology. Countries like China are transforming their systems to educate more high-tech professionals, and we should too. It's our best chance to keep our economy growing.



>> Focus on Staying Competitive in the Global Economy

IN THIS VIEW, the chief mission for American colleges and universities—including our community colleges—is to ensure that the US economy remains competitive in an increasingly tough global marketplace, and that means recapturing our lead in science and technology. We need to set higher standards for our young people and promote and reward excellence in these fields and others. Americans have to be ready and willing to compete with the best in the world. Many people say our collective prosperity and standard of living depend on it.

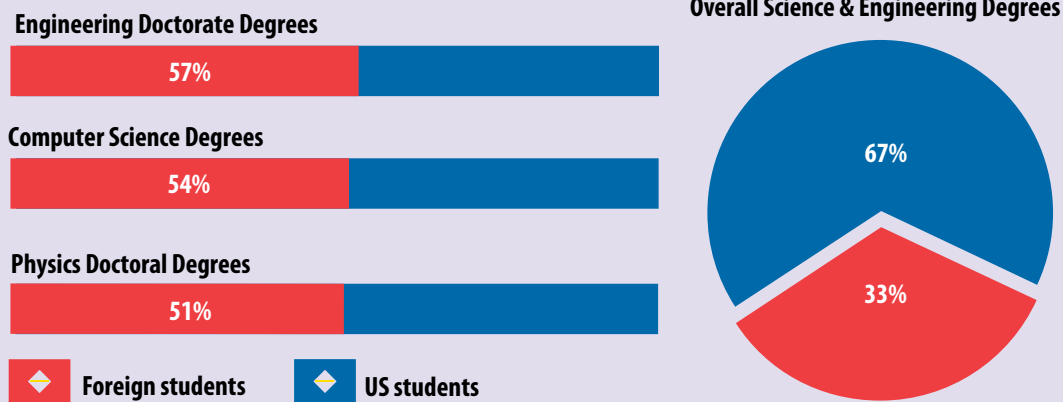
According to this option, the countries that will flourish in the world economy will be the ones that lead the way in science, technology, engineering, and math. This is not a new idea. This country's broad middle class and rising

standard of living were built on the genius of inventors and entrepreneurs like Henry Ford and Thomas Edison and, more recently, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. Leading economic studies, including the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Solow, suggest that most of the growth in our standard of living over the years has come from innovation and technological advances.

Innovation, Skills, and Research

To keep our competitive edge, our colleges and universities must help us develop more innovators, inventors, and entrepreneurs with expertise and creative new ideas in science and technology. We need a work force with top-

Foreign Students Earning Doctoral Degrees at US Colleges and Universities



Source: 2012 NSF Science and Engineering indicator report

notch skills in these areas, and in economics, business, and foreign languages as well. And we'll need groundbreaking research from university-based researchers and research centers throughout the United States. Universities conduct most of the basic research in the country; less than 20 percent is conducted by business and industry itself.

With new high-tech gadgetry coming out of American companies nearly every day, it is easy to miss the seriousness of the challenge, but it is real. The Business-Higher Education Forum, a coalition of company CEOs and college presidents, puts it this way:

We are deeply concerned by the shortfalls we see in America's ability to remain competitive in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. . . . These are cornerstones, fundamental to our ability to develop the skill sets and knowledge that will keep the United States intellectually vibrant and economically competitive.

In some respects, say those drawn to this option, the United States has already begun to lose its lead in this arena.

- Among the world's advanced nations, the United States is 27th in its proportion of college graduates receiving degrees in science and engineering.
- Nearly 6 in 10 engineering doctorates from US universities—and a third of science and engineering degrees overall—go to foreign students. In the past, many of these highly skilled PhDs from abroad stayed in the United States, becoming citizens and innovators here. Now, there's worldwide demand for their talent, so experts say we need more homegrown expertise.

Microsoft chair Bill Gates is one of many corporate leaders sounding the alarm. As he testified to Congress in 2008, there are some 100,000 new jobs in computer science

and engineering every year, but our colleges and universities turn out only about 15,000 new graduates with degrees in the field.

The lack of skilled professionals at the top can have a ripple effect. For example, Apple was founded by two Americans—Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak—and its sleek inventions are developed and perfected here. But when the company was ready to manufacture the iPhone, its executives calculated that they would need 8,700 industrial engineers to supervise some 200,000 assembly-line workers. Unfortunately, Apple's analysts determined that it could take as long as nine months to find that many qualified engineers in the United States. The managerial talent was readily available in China—finding them there would take about 15 days. This is just one example of how a shortage of scientific and engineering know-how can weaken the economy and undercut job creation.

Keeping the Breakthroughs Coming

To make sure the United States keeps producing scientific breakthroughs and cutting-edge inventions, we also need top-quality research coming out of university research centers. Wallace Loh, president of the University of Maryland, says:

Federally-funded university research has been a driving force in our economy since World War II and has helped the United States lead the world in science, technology and innovation . . . , [but] other nations are watching and emulating us. They realize that research universities are a fundamental component of an innovation economy.

The United States now ranks only 18th worldwide in the level of government-funded, university-based research, behind China and Korea among others.

What We Could Do

Because countries like China and India are transforming their higher education systems to help them compete in a high-tech, global economy, this option argues that the United States needs to do this too. This option offers the very best chance we have to keep our economy growing and maintain our country's position in the world.

But there would be trade-offs. Regaining our leadership in science and technology won't do much to help most Americans unless we have economic policies that support a robust middle class and offer wide opportunity. It could end up just enriching the people who are already doing well, and giving business and economic interests too much influence in higher education. Many worry that requiring more math and science will discourage some students, especially those whose interests lie elsewhere, making it harder for them to complete college. For example, a culture of competition, which prizes excellence and high standards, could lead us to neglect our obligation to students who aren't as accomplished or determined. Moreover, without the right values to guide us, technology and economic growth can do as much harm as good.

Here are some specific proposals suggested by this option:

- All college students would be required to study more math, science, economics, and foreign languages, and families should encourage children to pursue degrees in these fields.

But many students are neither interested nor adept in these subjects. College dropout rates could rise if students can't pass required courses in these fields.

Monkey Business Images/Dreamstime.com



- Scholarships and low-interest student loans should be geared to students who excel in math, science, engineering, and technology—the fields that provide the most benefit to the economy. It's time to re-allocate government and university funds to create top-notch science and technology programs and the labs and technology needed to support them.

But this means students who excel in the humanities or the arts won't get as much help as students in technical fields. And some departments could lose faculty and funding so students would have fewer courses and majors to choose from.

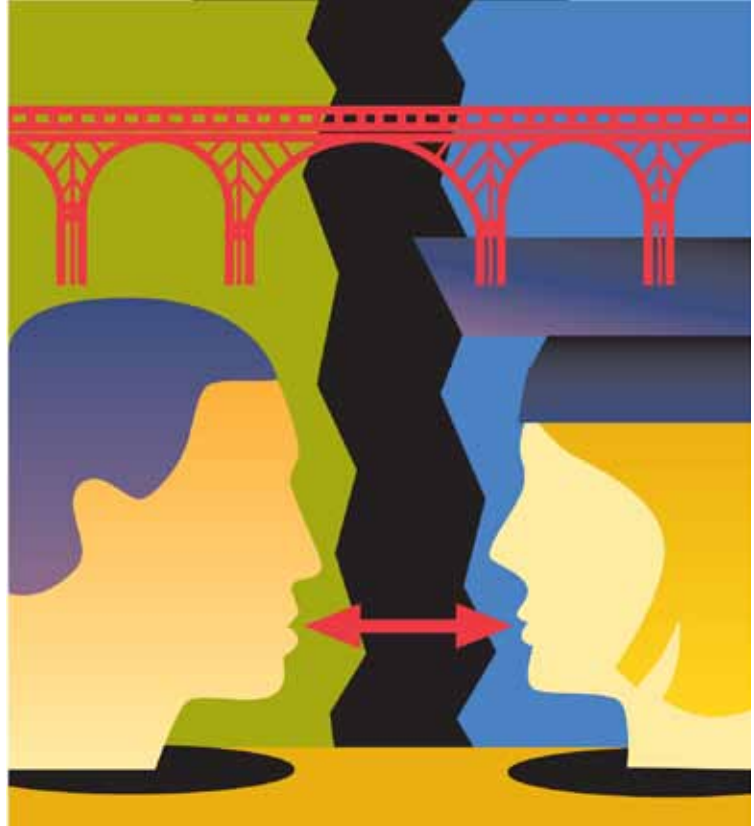
- Local businesses and national corporations should work with community colleges to design programs geared to our rapidly changing, high-tech economy—programs that reflect what employers need and want.

But community college students would receive a narrower education in these more limited, jobs-focused programs, and they would be less prepared to transfer into four-year degree programs when they finish.

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio, (with offices in Washington, DC and New York City) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It has provided issue books and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit www.kettering.org or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. Phone: 1-800-221-3657.

OPTION TWO

Many of the problems we face as a nation reflect an underlying crisis of division and mistrust. Higher education shapes students' views about the larger society, and it can do more to strengthen values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others. Students also need real-life experience in collaboration and problem solving.



>> Work Together and Repair an Ailing Society

FOR MANY PEOPLE, the United States was losing its way long before the recent Great Recession hit us. Many Americans are genuinely anguished about the state of our society and the divisions that seem to be splitting us apart. More than 7 in 10 of us believe people's sense of "right and wrong" is not as strong as it once was. And rather than collaborating and compromising to solve problems, we're continually battling each other.

These doubts and divisions are endangering our entire society. Public confidence in once-respected professions like the law, banking, journalism, and government service has plummeted. Lawyers and bankers are seen as greedy and quick to bend the rules to their own advantage. Journalists are seen as scandalmongers intent on grabbing attention—whatever works. And politicians? At the bottom of the barrel, according to most Americans.

According to this option, it's time for colleges and universities to take a stand and act forcefully to help us address this epidemic of division, declining ethics, and mistrust. Higher education helps shape students' views about the larger society, and it can do much more to reinforce bedrock values like responsibility, integrity, and concern for others. Higher education may not be able to fix the social and political ills of today, but it can help improve the society and politics of tomorrow, according to this option.

Public-Spiritedness Declining

People use many words and phrases to describe their worries about the state of our culture. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes about a lack of "public-spiritedness" which he defines as "a system of habits and

attitudes that would check egotism and self-indulgence.” Like many others, Brooks is concerned that we’ve become so focused on “what’s good for me” that we’ve forgotten what we owe each other.

Not only do we seem to be less responsible and public-spirited than we once were, we’re also a more divided and disconnected country—politically, economically, and even socially. Most of us socialize with people who pretty much share our own backgrounds and outlook. We go online to communicate primarily with people who share our interests and points of view.

What’s Trust Got to Do with It?

Author and social scientist Robert Putnam has pointed to a broad decline in community and in Americans’ ability to trust one another. He notes that the “proportion of Americans who socialize with their neighbors more than once a year has slowly but steadily declined over the last two decades, from 72 percent in 1974 to 61 percent in 1993. . . . Americans are also less trusting. The proportion of Americans saying that most people can be trusted fell by more than a third” over roughly the same period.

According to this option, the experience of getting to know our fellow citizens and talking and working with them is not just a pleasant luxury. Without it, we face a vicious circle of problems. Most Americans fear we’re losing our sense of shared values and public-spiritedness. Because of this, we don’t trust government or business or the press, and often, we don’t even trust each another. And because we’ve become more disconnected and isolated from one another, it’s tougher than ever to bridge our divides.

From Lack of Responsibility to Lack of Trust

Our inability to tackle the national debt is a stark example. For columnist Brooks, declining values helped create the problem. “Many generations had a moral aversion to debt. They believed that to go into debt was to indulge your basest urges and to surrender your future independence.” Living beyond our means has become a way of life for many Americans as well as for the federal government. Now, with more than \$15 trillion in debt, we can’t solve the problem because we don’t trust our leaders, and too many people seem solely concerned with protecting their own turf. And

this isn’t the only issue where distrust and division stands in the way of getting things done.

Getting the country back to where we share strong basic values and work together to solve problems is a huge mission, but according to this option, higher education can and should play a leading role.

What Does It Mean to Be Educated?

In 2009, two senior scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ann Colby and William Sullivan, offered a definition of what it should mean to be an educated person. They described five goals that they believe should be at the center of every college education. These were to help students:

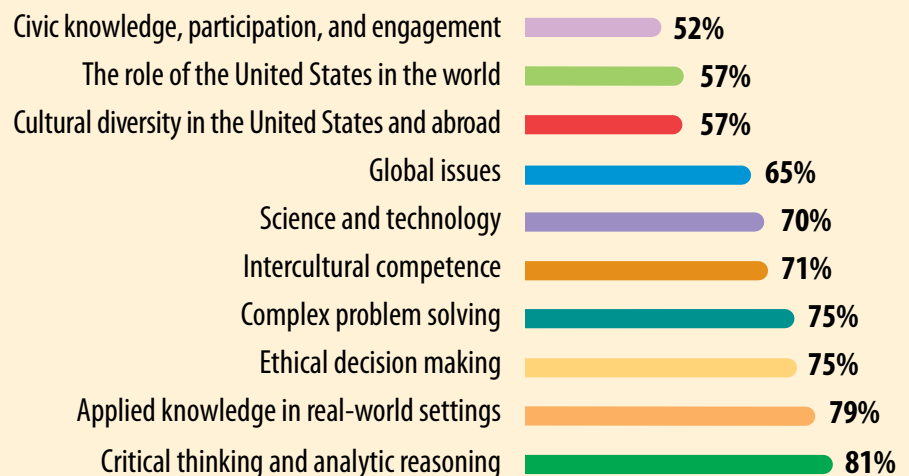
- Learn to work hard and strive to do their best
- Cultivate personal and academic integrity
- Contribute to the larger community—local, national, and global
- Take other people’s ideas and perspectives seriously
- Develop the practice of ethical and moral reasoning.

To be educated, in this view, means that students absorb high ethical standards and a strong sense of responsibility to and for others. In fact, surveys show that 75 percent of employers want colleges to put more emphasis on ethical decision making and more than half (52 percent) want more emphasis on civic knowledge, participation, and engagement.

Meanwhile, others are working on ways for colleges and universities to help students develop the skills of collabora-

Learning Outcomes and Workforce Expectations

Percentages of employers who want colleges to “place more emphasis” on essential learning outcomes



Source: Data from Hart Research Associates, 2010

tive problem solving and working across political and other boundaries. They argue that all students at community colleges and four-year institutions should study a broad range of subjects so they develop a genuine feel for how different people see the world. What's more, all students should acquire practical experience working on projects engaging with fellow students and citizens to tackle real-life issues facing their campuses and communities. This means more than volunteering or service learning. Students should learn how to bring people together to solve problems and achieve practical results. These skills are crucial in the work place as well as in our communities.

What We Could Do

This option suggests that colleges and universities should act to help us address declining values, division, and mistrust in society. Higher education should do much more to reinforce values like responsibility, integrity, and concern for others. We need stronger codes of student conduct designed to deter cheating and plagiarism, drug use, binge drinking, and inappropriate, disrespectful behavior that shows contempt for others. And colleges and universities should encourage students to give back to society. Not everyone has the privilege of going to college. As a part of this privilege, students (and faculty) have a responsibility to help improve the broader society.

Few would argue that higher education doesn't have a role reinforcing integrity and concern about the broader society, but there are trade-offs. This option means giving higher education more leeway to define what constitutes moral, ethical, and civil behavior, and many say that's a role for families, communities, and religious organizations—not for colleges and universities. This can be a slippery slope. Schools that start by regulating student behavior may move

on to attempts at shaping the attitudes and moral outlook of students, instead of focusing on developing their intellectual and career skills.

Here are some actions we might take, according to this option:

- Teaching integrity and responsibility and instilling habits of cooperation, problem solving, respect for others, and the ability to reach across divides should be part of every college education.

But this puts schools and professors in the position of deciding what's moral and responsible. Their job should be helping students acquire knowledge and teaching them intellectual and career skills.

- All students, including community college students, should study a curriculum geared to the challenges we face. It should include American and world history, science, the arts and literature, government, foreign languages, economics, and philosophy. A curriculum like this helps students develop a broad understanding of how different people think and feel, and how things work in our complex global society.

But encouraging this kind of general education could mean we won't have enough people who become highly skilled in business, science, and technology. It also means students have to invest time and money in courses that don't directly help them get jobs.

- Colleges and universities should have diverse student bodies and faculty, including students from other countries. Learning to work with different types of people is essential today.

But having more students from abroad means fewer slots for American students and many community colleges and universities are already overcrowded.

The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI)

This issue guide was prepared for NIFI in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation (and the American Commonwealth Partnership). Issue guides in this series are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. For a description of the National Issues Forums, log on to the website: www.nifi.org.

The American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP)

The ACP is an alliance of community colleges, colleges and universities, K-12 schools, and others dedicated to building "democracy's colleges" throughout higher education. Launched at the White House in early 2012, the start of the 150th anniversary year of the Morrill Act that created land-grant colleges, ACP uses the concept of democracy's colleges from land-grant and community college history. Democracy's colleges convey the idea of colleges and universities deeply connected to their communities, which make education for citizenship a signature identity.

Other Topics and Ordering Information

Recent topics in this series include the national debt, immigration, health care, energy, jobs, Social Security, and education. For more information, please visit www.nifi.org or contact NIF Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, Ohio 45441. Phone: 1-800-600-4060.

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OPTION THREE

We call this the land of opportunity, but it isn't that way for many Americans. Because graduating from college unlocks the door to advancement, higher education and government should do much more to ensure that all Americans have an equal shot at getting a degree—without accumulating huge debts.



>> Ensure that Everyone Gets a Fair Chance

WE LIKE TO THINK OF THE UNITED STATES as the land of opportunity, but many Americans say that our society is a lot less fair than it should be. Studies show that nearly half of Americans think wealthy parents and good connections—rather than individual effort and skill—is what helps people get ahead.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a child born into a poor family in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark has a better chance of moving up the income ladder than one born in the United States.

Because graduating from college can unlock the door to advancement and prosperity, this option argues that higher education, along with government at all levels, needs to do much more to ensure that all Americans have a genuine shot at getting a college degree. Unfortunately, rising costs, tough economic times, and inadequate public schools in some communities have put college out of reach for far too many Americans.

Rising Costs, Rising Debt

Most Americans know college costs have been rising, but many may not realize by how much. Tuition and fees at public universities (not private colleges) have jumped

47 percent in the past 10 years and, as every college student knows, there are many additional expenses as well.

Students and families cope by taking on more and more debt. According to a study from The Pew Charitable Trusts:

Borrowing has become a primary way to pay for the rising cost of higher education. In the early 1990s, less than half of graduates left college with loans outstanding. Now, by the time they graduate, nearly two-thirds of students at four-year colleges and universities have student loan debt. And the amount of college debt has increased sharply, even after accounting for inflation.

A Two-Tiered System

As a result of these trends, we seem to be moving toward a two-tiered higher education system—one where students' college experiences and career prospects depend on how wealthy their families are. Young people from affluent households can afford to go to college, attend full time, and live on campus. But the picture for middle- and lower-income students is very different. Some can't afford to go to college at all—they have to go to work immediately

to support themselves and their families. Those who do start college often have to go part time, juggling work and study. And even when they finish their degrees, many leave school heavily burdened with college debt.

Many students who start college—especially those from lower-income families—aren't able to complete their degrees successfully. This is tough for them personally, but many experts fear it will also leave the country with a seriously undereducated workforce. According to government projections, most newly created jobs over the next decade will require college and workforce training.

Compared to other advanced countries, we do reasonably well in the percentage of students who start college, but not nearly so well in the number who actually graduate. Among low-income and minority students, just 45 percent graduate within 6 years. And the after effects can last a lifetime. In 2010, workers without either a two-year or four-year degree were twice as likely to be unemployed as workers with a bachelor's degree. Over a lifetime, people without college degrees earn about half a million dollars less than those with bachelor's degrees.

Colleges Have an Obligation to Help Students Succeed

According to this option, taxpayers and others should be prepared to fund more scholarships and grants to help lower- and middle-class students get to college, stay in college, and graduate without crippling debts. Just as important, colleges need to get serious about cost-containment and be more open to using online education and consolidating duplicated courses and programs.

But giving everyone a fair chance is more than making college more affordable. Because our public school systems are so uneven—and because poor families often struggle to give their children the out-of-school support and experiences that buttress academic success—some students need extra help. When an institution admits a student and accepts that student's tuition money, backers of this option say, it also has an obligation to help that student graduate.

Support programs such as the Posse Foundation's have shown great success. Posse works with students who "may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes" and places them "in supportive, multicultural teams—Posses—of 10 students." These students have a 90 percent graduation rate, the foundation reports.

According to the ACT College Readiness Standards, more than three-quarters of students entering higher education are not adequately prepared for college-level reading, English, math, or science, so many students need extra help. Improving mentoring and remedial coursework not only helps these students graduate and better their own lives, but it's good for the economy too, according to this option. We need a better-educated workforce.

The whole country has an enormous stake in ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to attend college if they're motivated to do so. It's a core American value—providing a genuinely equal opportunity for all.

What We Could Do

This option holds that higher education must change so that all students have an equal chance both to attend college and to complete it. This means not only increasing access for all, but also providing the supports students need in order to graduate successfully. It also means putting a lid on the out-of-control costs of higher education that increasingly saddle families with debt they cannot afford.

Even so, there are trade-offs. There will always be people who don't want to go to college—who don't want to spend more time in the classroom after high school or who have other priorities and interests. There is an important debate about whether everyone should be encouraged to go on to college, or whether we'd actually help some young people more by improving vocational education in high schools or in the community. Some worry that increasing access will result in lower standards. And while many say colleges and universities can do more to control rising costs, public higher education has already been hit with big budget cuts leaving less "fat" to be eliminated. In this climate, controlling costs will likely mean compromises in the quality of education, such as larger class sizes and replacing traditional instruction with online education.

Here are some specific ideas to consider:

- Financial aid, including scholarships and work study opportunities, should be expanded to give lower- and middle-income students the help they need to attend college.

But this means basing these policies on a student's income rather than on his or her academic achievements or hard work in high school.

- Colleges and universities should keep costs under control by using more online courses and making sure programs and departments are really cost effective and necessary.

But this could reduce quality. Schools might not be able to provide the courses, facilities, and campus experiences that students deserve.

- Instead of giving up on students at risk of not graduating, colleges and universities should require professors and counselors to invest more time in tutoring and mentoring and should offer more effective remedial courses.

But colleges and universities may be tempted to lower standards to help students graduate. And, students have a responsibility here too—they have to put in the effort to do the work.

>> Shaping Our Future

How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want?

HIGHER EDUCATION HAS MANY BENEFITS for individuals. People who graduate from college earn more throughout their careers, and they are less likely to lose their jobs during a recession. But most of us haven't thought as much about how higher education helps us create and build the kind of society we want. Throughout American history, colleges and universities have been a key to our economic development and social progress.

Now the United States is facing serious challenges on a number of fronts. Our economy faces tough economic competition from countries like China and India, and our standard of living is at risk. We've become a divided nation and a "me-first" society. Many people worry that crucial values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others are fading. What's more, too many Americans who work

hard and play by the rules are slipping out of the middle class, and too many poor youngsters never get a fair chance at a good future in the first place.

How should higher education help us create the society we want? This guide offers three options to consider, each with benefits and trade-offs. There are many questions to keep in mind in weighing these options. For instance, how much can higher education really do? What are the costs we need to think about? And while colleges and universities can certainly pursue multiple goals—they already do—it's also true that they can't do everything. They have to make choices about how to use their resources. As we envision higher education's mission for the future, it is important to think and talk with fellow citizens. This guide is intended to launch that conversation.

OPTION ONE

FOCUS ON STAYING COMPETITIVE IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Higher education should help ensure that our economy remains competitive in a tough global marketplace—and that means recapturing our lead in science and technology. Countries like China are transforming their systems to educate more high-tech professionals, and we should too. It's our best chance to keep our economy growing.

Examples of What Might Be Done

All students should be required to take more courses in science and math, and families should encourage their children to pursue degrees in these areas.

Scholarships and low-interest loans should be geared to students who excel in math, science, engineering, and technology—fields that provide the most benefit to the economy.

Citizens should be willing to support more government funding for university-based science and technology research, especially projects where industry and higher education work together and share results.

Colleges and universities should re-allocate their funds to create top-notch science and technology programs and maintain the labs and technology needed to support them.

Local businesses and national corporations should work with community colleges to design programs geared to our rapidly changing, high-tech economy—programs that reflect what employers need and want.

BUT...

Without the right values to guide us, technology and economic growth can do as much harm as good. One danger is that emphasizing a culture of competition, which prizes excellence and high achievement, could lead us to neglect our obligation to those who aren't as accomplished or as competitive.

Trade-Offs to Consider

Many students aren't interested in or adept in these fields. College dropout rates could rise if students can't pass these required courses.

This means that students who excel in the humanities or the arts won't get as much help as students in technical fields.

Federal and state budgets are already gushing red ink, and too much involvement by business and industry could end up distorting the educational mission of higher education.

But this could narrow the curriculum and reduce students' choices. College should be a place where students study philosophy, art history, and music—a broad range of subjects.

Community college students would receive a narrower education in these more limited, jobs-focused programs, and they would be less prepared to transfer into four-year degree programs when they finish.

OPTION TWO

WORK TOGETHER AND REPAIR AN AILING SOCIETY

Many of the problems we face as a nation reflect an underlying crisis of division and mistrust. Higher education shapes students' views about the larger society, and it can do more to strengthen values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others. Students also need real-life experience in collaboration and problem solving.

Examples of What Might Be Done

Teaching integrity and responsibility and instilling habits of cooperation, problem solving, respect for others, and the ability to reach across divides should be part of every college education.

Colleges and universities should enforce codes of conduct that set high standards for honesty, integrity, and behavior.

Projects and internships that teach community and collaborative problem solving should be required as part of any educated person's experience.

Colleges and universities should have diverse student bodies and faculty, including students from other countries. Learning to work with people of different backgrounds is essential today.

All students—including community college students—should study American and world history, science, the arts and literature, government, economics, and philosophy. This helps students develop a better understanding of how different people think and how our society works.

BUT...

This means colleges and universities, rather than families and communities, will be shaping students' ethical, social, and political outlook. It's a slippery slope and one that takes time and resources away from higher education's mission of developing intellectual and career skills.

Trade-Offs to Consider

This puts schools and professors in the position of deciding what's moral and responsible.

This means colleges and universities will be policing students and prying into their private lives.

These projects thrust students and their colleges and universities into political debates and advocacy which is not appropriate for them.

Having more students from abroad means fewer slots for American students, and many community colleges and public universities are already overcrowded.

Emphasizing this kind of general education could mean we don't have enough highly skilled people in business, science and technology. It also means students have to invest time and money in courses that don't specifically prepare them for the job market.

OPTION THREE

ENSURE THAT EVERYONE GETS A FAIR CHANCE

We call this the land of opportunity, but it isn't that way for many Americans. Because graduating from college unlocks the door to advancement, higher education and government should do much more to ensure that all Americans have an equal shot at getting a degree—without accumulating huge debts.

Examples of What Might Be Done

Financial aid, including scholarships and work study opportunities, should be expanded to give lower- and middle-income students the help they need to attend college.

Colleges and universities should keep costs under control by offering more online courses and making sure that programs and departments are really cost effective and necessary.

We should support more government funding for low-income students, low-interest loans for middle-class students, and debt forgiveness for those who graduate with large debts.

Instead of giving up on students at risk of not graduating, colleges and universities should require professors and counselors to invest more time in tutoring and mentoring, and should offer more effective remedial courses.

State systems should require four-year schools to accept transfer students from community colleges and expand capacity so there's room for any student who wants to enter a bachelor's degree program.

BUT...

College is not for everyone. Higher education may end up lowering academic standards to help more students attend and graduate. And squeezing colleges and universities to keep costs low could reduce quality.

Trade-Offs to Consider

This means basing these policies on a student's income rather than on his or her academic achievements or abilities.

This could reduce quality. Schools might not be able to offer the courses, facilities, and campus experiences that students deserve.

Taxpayers are already stretched. Families will have less incentive to save for college.

Colleges and universities may be tempted to lower standards in order to help students graduate. And students have a responsibility here—they have to put in the effort to do the work.

This will mean more overcrowding and wait lists for more courses. Expanding capacity means spending more taxpayer dollars.