



Higher Education in the U.S.: Pathways to Success

Higher education in the United States is in a state of turmoil. In the period between 2010 and 2021, enrollment in postsecondary institutions fell by 15%, most dramatically among young men (Rose). A further drop in enrollment is expected in 2025, as a result of the drastic decrease in births during the 2007-2008 financial crisis (Rose). Tuition prices have doubled since 1993 and more than tripled since 1963, when statistics first became broadly available (Hall). Americans hold \$1.75 trillion in student loan debt, \$1.12 trillion (64%) of which is owed by 25-49 year olds (Hahn). A mere 36% of Americans report a significant level of trust in higher education, down from 48% in 2018 and 57% in 2015 (Blake). Only 62% of students who enroll in college complete their declared program within six years, and only 46% of college graduates report being employed in their field of study (Schaeffer)(Butts).

Additionally, the political dialogue of college campuses is completely dominated by partisan ideology. For example, Harvard University reported in 2023 that only 1% of faculty respondents indicated their political affiliation as conservative, while 82% identified themselves as liberal (McDonald). Similar striking contrasts in staff ideology are visible across both the public and private university system in the U.S.

Furthermore, liberal professors are far more likely to express political bias in the classroom than their conservative colleagues. 49% of American college students report frequent referral to political doctrine by their progressive educators, as opposed to 9% who indicate the same by conservatives (Rockenbach).

Despite all of this, a college education remains a worthwhile investment. College graduates earn, on average, \$22,000 more per year than those without a degree, and this income gap has increased over time (Nietzel). 83% of college graduates are employed, as opposed to 68.8% of those without a bachelor's degree, and 22% of uneducated Americans live in poverty, as opposed to only 6% of degree-holders (Nietzel) ("How does level of education relate to poverty? - Center for Poverty and Inequality Research"). Oftentimes, a postsecondary education means higher job and life satisfaction, which corresponds to greater health and longevity. Even with the tremendous benefits of a college education, many prospective students see the mounting issues in the education system and choose to opt out of the traditional university system.

What went wrong?

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, which expanded access to federal student aid from military veterans to the general public. Federal student aid programs have been greatly expanded under the administrations of subsequent U.S. presidents, including Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, allowing for largely unrestricted public access to federal funds for use towards any sort of degree or major (Gitlen).

Later, in 1983, the college-rating publication “U.S. News & World Report” was first published, and changed many of the processes and structures by which academic institutions operate. College administrators focused on logistical aspects of the grading system, such as staff salaries and individual student expenditure, to raise their ranking in the Report. This contributes to the rapid and steady growth of tuition prices since the early 1980’s (Jones).

The high availability of government student loans to the public for higher education purposes has led millions of Americans to take on ill-advised debt. Moreover, as more students gain access to federal funding to spend at universities, college administrators are at liberty to abide by a ranking scale that ultimately results in higher tuition costs. This cyclical process of government subsidy and administrative bloat has perpetuated for decades and significantly contributes to the inflated tuition and over-expensive costs of academic institutions today.

Possible Solutions

The university system is faced with a wide variety of issues, from political indoctrination to demographic concerns to improper budgeting techniques. These problems are widespread and institutional, but a postsecondary education remains an important aspect of building a financially successful career.

Many proposals have been made over the years to combat the ongoing student debt crisis, in addition to addressing broader concerns in academia and encouraging prospective students to seek a college degree. In August, 2022, the Biden Administration announced a program to cancel \$330 billion of federal student debt,

primarily amongst Pell Grant borrowers, but the executive order was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in June, 2023 (“Biden to Erase Up To \$20K in Student Loan Debt — Here's Who Qualifies”). Another proposal to cancel \$39 billion in debt was presented in July, but has also faced political and legal backlash (“New student loan debt forgiveness plan challenged by suit”).

Other political figures and state governments have sought to combat the crisis in higher education with a different approach. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has made national headlines for his administration’s direct method of academic reform, which focuses on career applicability and workforce relevance while eliminating the budget for non-academic administrative offices and irrelevant or unnecessary curricula (Cineas). Recent Florida legislation also cracked down on tenure and hiring processes in the state’s college and university system, setting stricter employment standards for school faculty (Cineas). Many conservative lawmakers have seen Florida’s legislative success and sought to emulate the movement in their own states.

Amidst the constant debate, many students feel as if their education and career aspirations have fallen through the cracks of bureaucracy. Institutional changes at colleges and universities take time to be implemented and students are often restricted by economics, geography, and a myriad of other factors from achieving their full academic potential.

College Level Examination Program, or C.L.E.P. tests, are a partial solution to the systemic issues in higher education. Priced at \$93 per test, C.L.E.P. exams cover specific topics at the college level and offer a varying amount of credits (3+) for degree-seeking students. Individual tests are unique, but many consist of 100

multiple choice questions to be completed in 90 minutes. C.L.E.P. exams must also be taken in a proctored test-taking center, which can be found at any number of local colleges and universities. Most testing facilities charge a fee for C.L.E.P. exams, which ranges from \$20 to \$50. (Visit <https://clep.collegeboard.org> to learn about specific exams)

While C.L.E.P. exams require diligent study and preparation, they provide an affordable and time-efficient method of advancing one's educational career. See the chart below to compare the cost of earning college credit through C.L.E.P. with the tuition at a local community college.

Course	Credits	CLEP Cost	STLCC Tuition	Mizzou Tuition
US History to 1865	3	~\$120	~\$400	~\$1200
College Composition	3	~\$120	~\$400	~\$1200
Biology	4	~\$120	~\$500	~\$1500
College Algebra	3	~\$120	~\$400	~\$1200

*Tuition costs reported by Missouri University and St. Louis Community College websites

Many prerequisite and underclassmen college courses are available through the College Level Examination Program. For example, in Missouri, the CORE 42 course block is a “general education framework that...guarantees transferability to

all public colleges and universities” in the state, according to St. Louis Community College. Every class required by the CORE 42 curriculum is available in the form of a C.L.E.P. test. While these examinations are difficult and require weeks of study, the time, resource, and financial investment of C.L.E.P. is drastically less than that of enrollment in a true college course.

Conclusion

The flaws in American higher education are well-documented and encompassing, yet the importance of a bachelor’s degree in terms of financial success and career advancement should not be understated. Legislation passed by both Democrat and Republican political officials seek to rectify past mistakes in the U.S. college system, but the public’s attitude towards post-secondary academics is worse than ever.

C.L.E.P. tests empower students to partially avoid the pitfalls and high costs of universities by testing out of entry-level college courses, saving valuable resources for students and their loved ones. There are many benefits in earning a bachelor’s degree and the College Level Examination Program provides a simpler and less restrictive pathway for those interested in pursuing higher education.

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