Two Years of Higher Education Should be Free

Nelson Mandela once said, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” That sentiment is one that we need to place more emphasis on in our society. One way that we can actualize it is by making two years of community college and trade school free. The benefits are abundant and would help improve the lives of everyone in the country. By making two years of community college free, we would raise the country’s education level, further stimulate the economy, and improve the wellbeing of people in the country. There is no reason that costs should be the barrier for someone’s education in a place where so many other necessities are commodified.

Cost is the biggest roadblock to one’s education and getting rid of that obstacle subsequently means eliminating the barrier that keeps most people from graduating. According to the education data initiative, up to 43% of students will drop out of community college but reducing the cost would lower that rate, leading to a country with a higher level of education. Critics will say that reducing the costs of tuition may not make that big of an impact because students will have to pay for room and board, however, 99 percent of community college students commute and do not live on campus. Making tuition free will allow people the opportunity to work and save money for other life necessities, like food and housing, as 80% are already employed while enrolled. Removing one of the biggest causes of stress for students would lead to higher rates of graduation, as well as higher rates of transfer to a 4-year university. According to Steven Zauderer, the CEO of CrossRiverTherapy, 50% of students will end up transferring to a 4-year university to pursue even more education, and those students are more likely to graduate than students who start their college career at a 4-year institution.

Aside from transferring, community college offers the opportunity for people to get jobs in their desired field after just 2 years of courses, rather than the typical 4. In America, we have a high rate of unemployment, and that is not necessarily caused by a lack of people willing to work, but rather some employers are asking too much of their applicants. According to Joseph Fuller, a Harvard Business School Professor, 65% of job postings for secretaries who work for executives require a college degree. But among current executive secretaries, only 19% have college degrees. This highlights that executives may believe there are more people with college degrees out there than there actually are. With the associate’s degree becoming the new standard, overtaking the high school diploma, we should make it free in the same way.

Doing so would stimulate the economy. More people in jobs they are qualified for means more earnings, and more taxes spent. According to the Census Bureau, over an adult's working life, high school graduates earn an average of $1.2 million while associate's degree holders earn about $1.6 million. This is a massive difference, totaling about 400,000 dollars. That is extra taxable income and more money for people to put back into the economy. With trade school, people would be taking up jobs that directly impact the infrastructure of the country, and thus make everyone’s lives easier by providing specialized services, and with more people taking advantage of this opportunity, there would be an increase in functional innovation. There is a growing need for blue collar jobs, and this would help ameliorate some of those problems by advancing immediately applicable fields. Without electricians, carpenters, mechanics, technicians, and plumbers, the country would literally fall apart. Another way people can save money is by taking these free community college classes in lieu of more expensive ones at the university they attend. Boston College costs around $80,000 per year, so it would be beneficial if we could complete credits elsewhere for cheaper if we fall behind or want to get ahead. Countries with higher levels of education typically have faster economic growth than their counterparts. People from many walks of life will be afforded a new opportunity to better their lives.

Research has shown time and time again that education is one of the primary drivers behind social class mobility. In a country with so much inequality, it is important that we start leveling the playing field and allowing people the opportunity to control their own lives, rather than remain trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation. The best way to do this is to educate these people on their circumstances, and then provide them with the tools to make the changes they desire. Equity in education has been lacking since the days of “separate but equal.” Making two years of community college and trade school free will serve to close this gap and ameliorate problems of equity as they reverberate through many aspects of life, education being the most important. Removing cost allows people who otherwise would not be able to afford the betterment of their lives the opportunity to take advantage of their ability to learn and progress.

Though, the biggest question still remains. How will all of this be paid for? There is a solution, a higher excise tax on harmful goods such as tobacco, alcohol, and firearms. Excise tax is defined as taxes that are paid when purchases are made on a specific good, such as gasoline, and are often included in the price of the product. For example, in 2022, the tobacco industry in the United States made 106 billion dollars. A 10% increase in the excise tax on it would equate to 10 billion dollars. Additionally, research shows that increases in tobacco prices will lead to less users. According to an article by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, the economic costs of cigarette smoking exceeds 300 billion dollars annually, with 225 billion for direct healthcare spending. About half of this is funded through medicare and Medicaid, which are federal programs. The money saved here could also help alleviate the costs of enacting free community college. With just the increase in excise tax, the programs could easily pay for themselves with time and decent investments.

After all of this, we are left with the question, why not? People are scared of change and change can be slow. This plan would mark a drastic change in the lives of people in America. We live in a globalized society and should be preparing people to become better decision makers, as well as more well-rounded individuals. People are also worried about increases in their taxes, but as the plan states, the bill would not be footed by the general public, but rather corporations who spend billions of dollars on advertising for deadly goods, such as the three aforementioned industries. Free community college would raise the country’s education level, stimulate economic growth, and grant a healthier wellbeing to people who live here. Benjamin franklin once said, “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest,” and I know it is time for us to start making smarter decisions for our future. I implore you all to go out and support plans similar to this so that we can take strides and become the example for the world that we (cl)aim to be. Thank you.

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