

# point of view

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## What Kind of Tuition-Free College Education?

Structural Change Imperative before Investing Billions in Free College



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In January 2015, President Obama launched America's College Promise, calling for a national tuition-free community college system that would cost \$60 billion in federal funds and \$20 billion in state funds over a 10-year period. Tennessee opened the doors of its community and technical colleges this fall with a flood of new students taking advantage of this new opportunity; Oregon plans to follow soon. The Tennessee Promise is offered to every graduating high school senior in the state and covers all tuition and fees that

federal grants and state scholarships and assistance programs do not. There are requirements to be met: Students must attend full-time and maintain a 2.0 grade point average, along with meeting with mentors and completing at least eight hours of community service.

U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders has argued for all American public colleges to be tuition-free, which would increase the costs to taxpayers considerably. Before this runaway train gets too far down the road we need to ask what kind of tuitionfree education these advocates are asking us to support.

We definitely do not need to make tuition-free an education system that does not work. In the May 22, 2015 *Christian Science Monitor*, former Labor Secretary Robert Reich asked us to reinvent the entire education system by pointing out that "...much of our education system — from bells that ring to separate classes to memorization drills—was built to mirror the assembly lines that powered the American economy for the last century." Provocateurs and national reports have been making this same case for decades: the major barrier to educational reform and transformation is the historical architecture of higher education that is still embedded in the agricultural economy of the 18th

Century and the industrial economy of the 19th Century. In the secondary schools classes still end at 3 p.m. so that students can milk the cows, gather the eggs, and feed the hogs. In higher education we have been tagged as a group who finds it easier to move a cemetery than to change the curriculum. (In either case, there is no help from the residents.) Roger Moe, former majority leader of the Minnesota State Senate and education reformer, has remarked, "Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy."

Our leaders need to be very cautious about asking for tuition-free institutions of higher education before billions are thrown down a black hole. The most recent reform efforts sound a cautionary note. In the last decade and a half the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Kresge Foundation and others have pumped millions into the community college sector to support what is called the Completion Agenda or the Student Success Agenda. There have been some modest increases in retention and graduation rates, but in a new book this year the key researchers at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University responsible for the most substantive research ever conducted on community colleges summarize "...despite an expansive reform movement built on the dedicated participation of thousands of faculty, administrators, policymakers, state education officials, researchers, and others, there is little evidence that the nation is moving toward a widespread and significant improvement of the outcomes of community college students." Thomas Bailey and his colleagues at Columbia question "whether the structure (of the community college) itself may be contributing to students' lack of progress."

Before funds are allocated for tuitionfree colleges we need a National Commission on an Educational System for the 21st Century supported by grants from Gates, Lumina, Kresge, and others. We need a model of education that is not time-bound, place-bound, bureaucracy-bound, and role-bound. A 21st Century model of a quality education for our students might include some of the following elements:

- \* The primary purpose of education is to expand and improve student learning.
- \* All employees of the college are facilitators of learning, and criteria for their selection are based on indicators they have the skills to expand and improve student learning.
- \* Education should be a seamless path from kindergarten through graduate school with an individual Student Success Pathway designed individually for each student to navigate this journey.
- \* Technology should be designed and implemented to ensure that every student will benefit by the creation of a Student Success Pathway in which the student's journey is framed, monitored, assessed, summarized, and celebrated.

\* Technology should be designed and implemented to allow the college's learning facilitators (faculty, administrators, student service personnel, classified staff, and student assistants) to engage collaborative, active, project-based, and inquirybased practices and programs.

\* The role of students must be redesigned to require them to participate more actively in the design and execution of their own learning. If students are to become independent thinkers and doers responsible for their own behaviors they must learn this as a key part of the educational experience.

\* Assessment must include the affective or non-cognitive domains to ensure we are working with the "whole" student. Students must be taught early on the importance of self-assessment and how to conduct self-assessments.

\* The values and skills from workforce education and liberal education must be integrated into a new Essential Education for all students — not separated as complementary.

\* Every policy, regulation, program, and practice should be subject to the questions: Does this action improve and expand learning? How do we know this action improves and expands learning?

\* There must be a complete overhaul of federal, state, and local policies regarding funding, governance, and accountability to ensure that the purpose of such policies is to improve and expand student learning.

These brief recommendations are inadequate to create a new educational system for the 21st Century; they only suggest a beginning. The task is complex; the key players are unwilling to deviate from a system they have designed and have figured out how to navigate; the entire educational system is wrapped in "100 years of bureaucracy;" there really are no easy solutions. We need a leader who answers in the affirmative the question T. S. Eliot's main character in the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock asks, "Do I dare to disturb that universe?" Until that leader from the foundations, from the federal government, or from institutions of higher education takes rein we should hold up on funding tuition-free colleges or we will end up as usual not with a bang but a whimper.

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*This article is the continuation of a series authored by principals involved in the Roueche Graduate Center, National American University, and other national experts identified by the center. John E. Roueche and Margaretta B. Mathis serve as editors of the monthly column, a partnership between the Roueche Graduate Center and Community College Week. For additional information send emails to [mbmathis@national.edu](mailto:mbmathis@national.edu) or call 512-813- 2300.*