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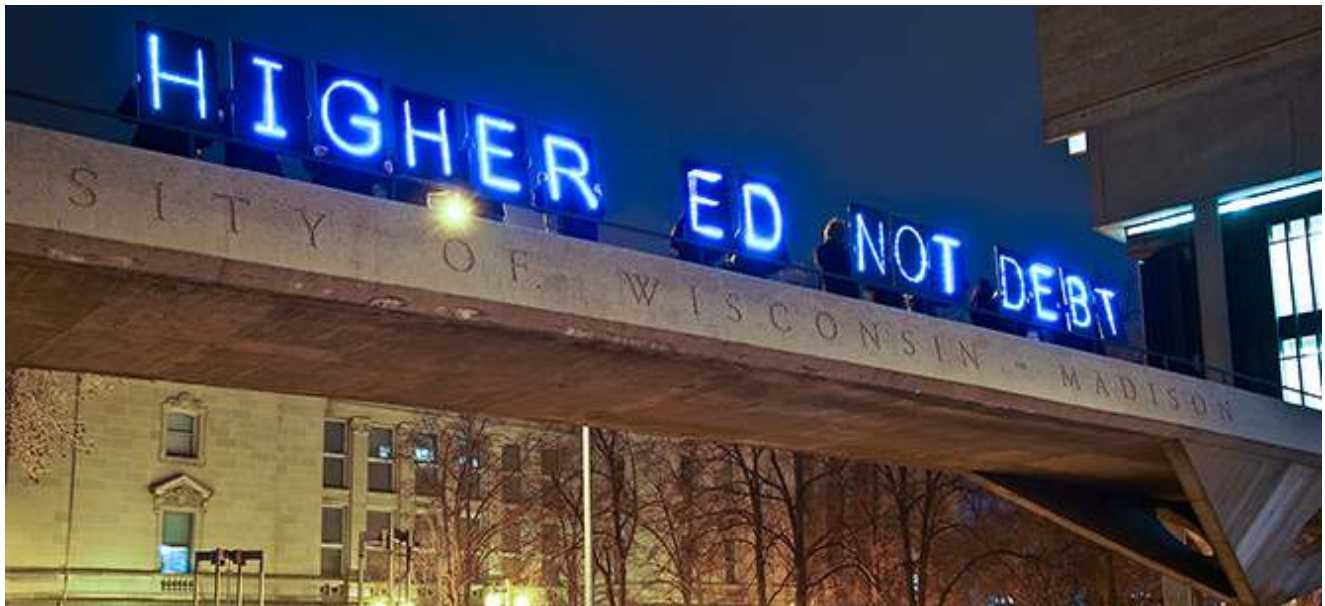
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The Case Against Free College

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Matt Bruenig ■ [Fall 2015](#)



Student debt activists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, March 2014 (Light Brigading / Flickr)

This article is part of Dissent's special issue of "Arguments on the Left." Click to read contending arguments from [Tressie McMillan Cottom](#) and [Mike Konczal](#).

In the United States, as in much of the rest of the world, college students receive three kinds of public benefits: tuition subsidies, living grants, and public loans. Through various combinations of this benefit troika, almost all students are able to finance their college education. Some on the left are very unhappy with the precise mix of student benefits currently on offer. Student debt activists, among others, complain that tuition subsidies and living grants make up too little of the student benefit bundle, while public loans make up too much of it.

Recently, this complaint has begun to coalesce into a number of movements and proposals for “free college.” I put the phrase in quotes because it means different things to different people. For some, “free college” means subsidizing tuition to zero. For others, it means subsidizing tuition to zero and providing living grants high enough to completely cover room and board. For still others, it appears to mean putting in place some mix of means-tested tuition subsidies, living grants, and even subsidized work-study jobs that, combined with expected parental assistance, allow nearly all students to leave college with little to no debt.

One could write at great length about these different conceptions of “free” and the policy proposals that have formed around them. For instance, since people who do not attend college also have housing and food costs, is it really correct to say room and board is a cost of attending college? Why do none of these conceptions consider as a cost of college all of the potential wages students forego by choosing to study rather than work? Does parental assistance with college really help to make it free or is it more properly understood as a family wealth transfer that students then pay towards their higher education?

Of greater importance than all of those questions, however, is the more basic question about the fairness of free college as an idea. Those clamoring for free college make normative claims about the nature of a just and good society. As currently argued, however, these claims are largely unconvincing. Without a dramatic overhaul of how we understand student benefits, making college more or entirely free would most likely boost the wealth of college attendees without securing any important egalitarian gains.

The main problem with free college is that most students come from disproportionately well-off backgrounds and already enjoy disproportionately well-off futures, which makes them relatively unconvincing targets for public transfers. At age nineteen, only around 20 percent of children from the poorest 2 percent of families in the country attend college. For the richest 2 percent of families, the same number is around 90 percent. In between these two extremes, college attendance rates climb practically straight up the income ladder: the richer your parents are, the greater the likelihood that you are in college at age nineteen. The relatively few poor kids who do attend college heavily cluster in two-year community colleges and cheaper, less selective four-year colleges, while richer kids are likely to attend more expensive four-year institutions. At public colleges (the type we’d likely make free), students from the poorest fourth of the population currently pay no net tuition at either two-year or four-year institutions, while also receiving an average of \$3,080 and \$2,320 respectively to offset some of their annual living expenses. Richer students currently receive much fewer tuition and living grant benefits.

Given these class-based differences in attendance levels, institutional selection, and current student benefit levels, making college free for everyone would almost certainly mean giving far more money to students from richer families than from

poorer ones. Of course, providing more generous student benefits might alter these class-based skews a bit by encouraging more poor and middle-class people to go to college or to attend more expensive institutions. But even reasonably accounting for those kinds of responses, the primary result of such increased student benefit generosity would be to fill the pockets of richer students and their families.

Student benefit campaigners tend not to focus on these sorts of distributive questions, preferring instead to gesture towards a supposed student debt crisis to prove that those who attended college really are a hurting class needing higher benefits. While there are certain extreme cases of students with very high debts, and certain college sectors such as for-profits that are truly immiserating specific groups of students, the reality remains that college graduates are generally on track for much better financial outcomes than non-attendees. Even in the wake of the Great Recession, which hit young people harder than anyone else, those with bachelor's degrees had median personal incomes \$17,500 higher than young high school graduates. Just one year of this income premium would be enough to wipe out the median debt of a public four-year-college graduate, which currently stands slightly above \$10,000.

Although extending extra benefits to such a disproportionately well-off group is a deeply suspicious idea, the way American student benefit campaigners talk about it is somehow worse still. Due to the toxic American mix of aversion to welfare benefits, love of individual rights, and faith in meritocracy, the typical line you hear about free college is that it should be a right of students because they have worked hard and done everything right. The implicit suggestion of such rhetoric is that students are really owed free college as the reward for not being like those less virtuous high school graduates who refuse to do what it takes to better themselves through education.

Needless to say, such thinking is extremely damaging to a broader egalitarian project, even more so in some ways than its goal of setting aside a part of our national income for the inegalitarian aim of making college free. If we are actually going to push a free college agenda, it should not be under a restrictive students' rights banner, but instead under a general pro-welfare banner. The goal of free college should not be to help students *per se*, but instead to bind them to a broader welfare benefit system. By presenting their tuition subsidies and living grants as indistinguishable from benefits for the disabled, the poor, the elderly, and so on, it may be possible to encourage wealthier students to support the welfare state and to undermine students' future claims of entitlement to the high incomes that college graduates so often receive. After all, the college income premium would only be possible through the welfare benefits to which the rest of society—including those who never went to college—has contributed.

Without understanding and presenting student benefits as welfare handouts, a free college agenda has no real egalitarian purpose. Giving extra money to a class of

disproportionately well-off people without securing any reciprocal benefit to poor and working-class people who so often do not attend college, all while valorizing the college student as a virtuous person individually deserving of such benefits, would be at worst destructive, and at best, totally pointless.

Matt Bruenig is a writer who researches poverty, inequality, and welfare systems.

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