



For College, Community, and Justice

HOPE4COLLEGE.COM

## #RealCollege Federal Policy Agenda: 2021

Education beyond high school is essential to America's economic recovery. But the nation's current higher education and safety net policies, and the systems they reflect and create, do not address the new economics of college. The vast majority of students and families need help affording college, and the standard approach of using savings, work, and debt to pay is failing, resulting in widespread financial precarity and stark racial and wealth inequality. It is time for structural reforms that create an ecosystem to secure students' basic needs, allowing them to focus on learning, and thus making education beyond high school more accessible, equitable, and affordable.

Each year of [education beyond high school](#) improves social, economic, civic, and health outcomes for students, their children, communities, and the economy. Simultaneously, a college credential has grown in importance; it has become harder to achieve for many students. [Systemic barriers](#), the [rising price of attending college](#), and the [increased cost of living](#) have placed education beyond high school out of reach for too many students.

The Hope Center urges the federal government to center students' humanity and reflect their experiences by modernizing both social and higher education programs. We call for systemic reforms to address intersecting racial and structural inequities, a threadbare safety net, and the perpetual underfunding of public higher education and Minority-Serving Institutions.

### RECOGNIZING #REALCOLLEGE STUDENTS' HUMANITY: SECURING BASIC NEEDS

To ensure students can achieve a college credential, we must first ensure that their basic needs are met. [Basic needs insecurity](#) refers to students' limited ability to cover expenses like food, housing, child care, transportation, healthcare, and technology that can directly harm academic success. **Students will not learn if they are distracted by the struggle to meet their basic needs.** The current ecosystem is not working. It includes [insufficient financial aid](#) and a patchwork of means-tested programs reliant on an [outdated poverty metric](#) and marked by complex bureaucracies and [administrative burdens](#).

Public support programs are a critical mechanism to complement higher education funding streams and reduce hardship to [support college attendance](#). For example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Child Care Development Block Grant could all contribute to college success. However, these programs [currently contain restrictions](#) that greatly reduce access for undergraduates. Issues to be addressed include work requirements, which often define postsecondary education as ineligible, and a construction of eligibility standards focused on disqualifying students rather than opening doors. As a result, students face a poverty trap, forced to sacrifice mobility-promoting education to meet their basic needs.

## THE 117TH CONGRESS AND BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION SHOULD MODERNIZE THE SAFETY NET TO PROMOTE COLLEGE ATTAINMENT:

- 1. Treat the pursuit of a postsecondary credential as meeting any compliance, work participation, and/or core activity requirements for all public benefit programs.** Remove mandates to combine work with education, time restrictions, and limitations on programs or degrees in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, and Child Care Development Block Grant program. Additionally, pass [The College Student Hunger Act of 2019](#) which would improve access to food for students.
- 2. Expand the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to higher education.** Short of a full expansion, Congress should pass the [Food for Thought Act](#) which establishes a pilot program that allows community colleges to provide meals and snacks to eligible students.
- 3. Fully fund federal child care programs to meet the needs of eligible populations.** Expand investment and access to child care subsidies and support through the [Child Care Development Block Grant](#), [Child Care Access Means Parents in School](#), [Head Start](#), and [Early Head Start programs](#).
- 4. Create affordable housing programs for students.** Pass the [Housing for Homeless Students Act](#) which allows full-time college students who experienced homelessness to benefit from the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. Remove student restrictions in public housing programs and [identify best practices](#) for federal collaboration with colleges and universities.
- 5. Improve access to affordable health care, increase the federal minimum wage to \$15, expand broadband internet access, and improve the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** We support the broader agenda to help working and middle-income families access economic opportunity.

## REIMAGINING HIGHER EDUCATION: SERVING #REALCOLLEGE STUDENTS

Higher education has not evolved with the [changing needs of students](#). Outdated and racialized assumptions about the circumstances facing today's students, combined with chronic and inequitable underfunding of public colleges and universities and Minority-Serving Institutions, has created a perfect storm. The rising price of attendance, primarily caused by [state budget cuts](#), has coincided with the increasing price of other essentials, from food to housing and childcare. These budget cuts have also resulted in states and institutions underinvesting in the types of high-quality teaching and student supports associated with completion. Wealth inequality and the hollowing out of the middle-class — especially the [Black middle class](#) — has made paying for college and basic needs even more difficult. Those who attend college while working face few opportunities for well-paid work to support their ability to go to school.

The treatment of part-time students provides a good illustration of the problem. Students with family obligations, those from minoritized backgrounds, disabled students, and those who are the first in their families to attend college are more likely to attend part-time rather than full-time. As a result, they receive much less aid; while they have lower tuition expenses, their costs of living are not correspondingly reduced just because they take fewer courses, nor are their work opportunities sufficiently increased. Moreover,

appropriations to colleges and universities are often based on a formula that mistakenly [assumes part-time students require less support outside the classroom](#). The vast majority of new college enrollment following the Great Recession was among part-time students; if not addressed for the current economic climate, these students will be pushed into debt and far less likely to complete degrees.

## THE 117TH CONGRESS AND BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION SHOULD REIMAGINE THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM TO PROMOTE COLLEGE ATTAINMENT:

- 1. Create a federal-state partnership that ensures adequate and equitable funding for public colleges and universities.** Funds should be distributed equitably and prioritize community colleges, regional public comprehensive universities, and Minority-Serving Institutions to offer at least two years of tuition-free public education beyond high school.
- 2. Reform federal higher education funding.** Ensure that all funding uses a formula based on total headcount and not full-time-equivalent to reduce inequality among students and institutions.
- 3. Make permanent federal emergency aid for students.** Pass the [Emergency Grant Aid for College Students Act](#), which would establish a permanent emergency grant program for students facing unanticipated expenses. Ensure that students who are not currently eligible to receive federal financial aid are eligible to apply for and receive emergency grants.
- 4. Enhance affordability by formalizing partnerships between federal agencies.** Pass the [Basic Act](#) which would provide grants to institutions to identify and meet the basic needs of students, establish data sharing agreements with other federal agencies, and coordinate the enrollment of students in federal benefits programs.
- 5. Cancel student debt, reform higher education tax credits, and improve for-profit college accountability.** We support the efforts of our partner organizations that are committed to ensuring students have the ability to afford, access, persist and complete a postsecondary credential and are not burdened by student debt.

## MOVING FORWARD

The Higher Education Act of 1965 anticipated a very different higher education landscape than the one we have now. Public interest in the pursuit of education beyond high school is widespread, the economic imperative remains strong, and yet many students are starting college without completing degrees. This is a waste of talent and harms the health and wellbeing of this nation. It is time for a radical reimagining; the stark racial and wealth inequities now marking this nation call for far more than technocratic tweaks to extant higher education policies. It is time to build a new approach to higher education that embraces the students we have the opportunity to support, rather than the students some wish we had. Creating a robust ecosystem of social policies blended and braided with higher education policies will help secure students' basic needs, reflect the changing demographics of today's students, and promote college attainment.



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