



For College, Community, and Justice

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Statement from Hope Center President & Founder Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab: The Time to Prioritize #RealCollege Students Is Now

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This is the moment we have all been waiting for, especially #RealCollege students—past, present, and future. College should not create poverty, and no one should have to skip meals to get an education.

The Biden Administration has wisely selected James Kvaal, a highly qualified leader, to serve as Under Secretary of Education and lead the effort to cancel student loan debt, reform the student loan program, and ensure the Department of Education has the staff and resources it needs to focus on the needs of #RealCollege students. Kvaal's nomination advanced through the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee with overwhelming bipartisan support, but he has yet to take office. This delay is shortsighted and puts both current and future students and borrowers at risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis have been devastating to #RealCollege students, their families, and student borrowers. [Nearly 3 in 5 students](#) are experiencing basic needs insecurity, while millions are navigating a patchwork system of [emergency grant aid](#) and a [complex web of public benefits programs](#) that often excludes students entirely. Meanwhile, [hundreds of thousands](#) of defrauded borrowers are awaiting relief, while millions more must prepare for [student loan payments](#) to restart.

One of the most important actions the Under Secretary can take is to appoint a role that will focus on basic needs [to lead efforts](#) to [bridge higher education and social policy](#). Much student debt is accrued due to living expenses; this position is essential to reducing the need to borrow and ameliorating food and housing insecurity. Many members of Congress champion [these causes](#) and recognize their importance in addressing racial inequality. Similarly, Kvaal has a demonstrated track record of promoting free college proposals, a strong indication of his commitment to implement them should they come to fruition at ED. This will significantly reduce debt, particularly among borrowers of color.

We can and should cancel student loan debt and make the loan program work better for borrowers while also ensuring the Department of Education enacts long-term systemic change for #RealCollege students. We can prioritize students' basic needs, tackle the rising price of college, and protect students and borrowers. There is no reason to choose. Further delays in equipping the Department of Education for meaningful action hurt the nation.

We must use every tool to remedy [the mistakes](#) of the previous administration, which [did little](#) to support #RealCollege students, and whose [relentless focus on deregulation](#), assault on [civil rights](#), and a [blind eye](#) toward [the problems](#) of student borrowers contributed to the inequities we see today. Addressing student debt and fully staffing the Department of Education are mutually reinforcing. The Undersecretary's role is integral to enacting systemic change to address the roots of basic needs insecurity, college affordability, and

the student debt crises.

The time is now to make good on the promise of a reimagined higher education system that ensures every student can access the economic agency with a college degree. We are long overdue for federal leadership that prioritizes changes to higher education that center the experiences of today's students and reverses the damage done both by active policy choices and benign neglect. Congress should act and swiftly to confirm James Kvaal.