

# Hybrid College

By Hanna Skandera

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## Key Points

- Even among those who make it to college, less than 75 percent persist beyond the first year. Meanwhile, only 11 percent of business leaders strongly agree that college graduates have the skills employers need.
- Hybrid college could be a catalyst to rethink education. Hybrid college combines the flexibility of an online degree with in-person support and community building.
- Hybrid colleges could considerably increase persistence and graduation rates while decreasing student debt.

The American dream—the belief that anyone is capable of upward mobility and a better life than the one in which they were born—is in jeopardy. According to Harvard economist Raj Chetty, American families are experiencing reduced upward mobility across generations. As Gareth Cook wrote in the *Atlantic*:

In one early study, [Chetty] showed that children born in 1940 had a 90 percent chance of earning more than their parents, but for children born four decades later, that chance had fallen to 50 percent, a toss of a coin.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the American dream is at risk, and education is the key to reversing the trajectory of upward mobility, imparting what it means to be a good citizen, and making the American dream a dream to, once again, be grasped.

To propel society toward a better future for all, we must refocus on the following.

1. **A Flexible Education System That Is Not Entrenched in Existing Silos.** Our rigid system does not meet the needs of all students, resulting in increasing numbers of youth disconnected from the system entirely. Even among those who make it to college, less than 75 percent persist beyond the first year.<sup>2</sup> Further, completion rates for low-income students average below 10 percent,<sup>3</sup> and 70 percent of students who leave college can't go back because of work or family commitments.<sup>4</sup>
2. **A Workforce Where Supply Meets Demand.** Before the coronavirus, the number of job openings in the US surpassed the number of people available and qualified to fill them, and only 11 percent of business leaders strongly agreed that college graduates have the skills employers need.<sup>5</sup>
3. **A System Design That Keeps the End in Mind.** With our current system, 20 percent of young millennials have over \$50,000 in student debt,<sup>6</sup> expecting to pay it off in their

50s, which hinders their opportunity for upward mobility. Further, only 26 percent of US adults strongly agree that their education is relevant to their work and day-to-day life.<sup>7</sup>

Hybrid college is a catalyst to rethink how we use key leverage points—time, talent, technology, and funding—to smooth the transitions between K–12, higher education, and work. It allows for blurring the lines, softening our existing silos, and creating a student-centered strategy designed with the end in mind.

### Hybrid College and Education Transformation

Hybrid college redesigns the pathways among education, work, and life so that all people, especially those most at risk, can achieve lifelong upward economic mobility and be more engaged citizens—the American dream. This solution is threefold:

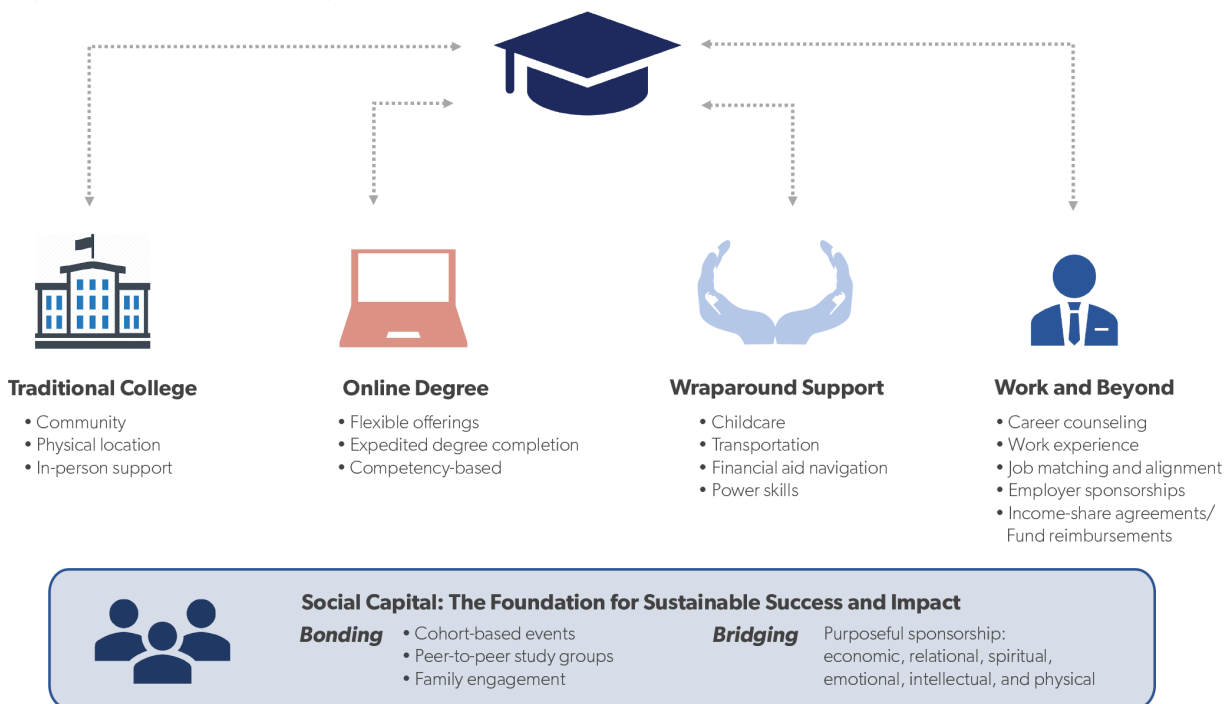
1. Enroll more students in affordable college,
2. Graduate those students at dramatically higher rates, and

3. Align certificates, credentials, and degrees with regional employment needs, closing the supply/demand gap.

The hybrid college concept combines the flexibility of an online degree and credential offerings with in-person support and community building (Figure 1). To ensure success for all students, the programming provides hands-on career counseling and work experience and enables connections to wrap-around supports, such as childcare and transportation, to maximize access. Students attend weekly coaching meetings and additional community events with peers in person. Substantially reduced facility and in-person faculty costs allow for a more affordable and successful experience.

With the hybrid college model, pathways are nonlinear and dynamic, and opportunity seekers weave together education and work throughout their lives while sharing responsibility for financing with future employers and being more aligned to evolving employer and industry needs. And perhaps most importantly, students can begin their college career while enrolled in the K–12 pipeline, allowing for a seamless transition before they are lost in the shuffle of the broader system.

**Figure 1. The Hybrid College Model**



Source: Author.

Flexibility is a cornerstone of this solution. The hybrid online format enables students to attend class from any location, and the asynchronous structure provides for flexible scheduling. The goal in this competency-based approach is mastery. Support from coaches and peers is provided through a cohort format, alongside teaching the power skills needed (aka “soft skills”) for career attainment and advancement. Further, it allows students to stay in their communities and remain with or near family and job responsibilities. Overall, this solution embraces the idea that students can and should have responsibility for their own learning, and education offerings must adapt accordingly.

Startup endeavors such as PelotonU, College Unbound, and Duet have seen early success.<sup>8</sup> Out-of-pocket costs for students are more affordable, typically under \$7,000 per year. College Unbound and PelotonU have first-year persistence rates greater than 75 percent and graduation rates above 80 percent.<sup>9</sup> PelotonU’s graduates experienced an average wage gain of \$18,324, and 74 percent of Duet’s graduates are making more than \$36,000 per year.

Expanded hybrid colleges across the country could transform the education system and dramatically improve crucial outcomes. Persistence in postsecondary settings and completion rates of low-income students would increase, while student debt decreases. These indicators often result in increased employment at a living wage, which will help the community as a whole.

As previously mentioned, this model has emerged through startup endeavors across the country. However, policymakers can facilitate growth of this model to improve outcomes for students. For example, funding could be aligned to incentivize persistence and completion rates, and further flexibility could

be given to Pell Grants to accommodate students pursuing various pathways. Pell Grants could be adjusted to allow for the eligibility for short-term programs, increased grant amounts, and flexibility with funding. States should consider enabling financial aid to include adult learners and part-time students to meet the needs of all prospective students.

In addition, redesigning accreditation will be important. Policy could enable college credit for work experience and expand early college high schools to smooth the transition and likelihood for stronger results. Ultimately, policymakers should reflect on whether the existing measures of student success represent those that we value today in an evolving landscape around work and employability, as the success of this model requires reorienting our mindset on what constitutes education and what we say is important.

The need for a hybrid college solution today is critical. The coronavirus has only accelerated demand. With the hybrid college, we can realign systems to meet the needs of our students, creating greater academic and economic outcomes, greater civic participation, and less reliance on government assistance.

The unprecedented situation triggered by COVID-19 has inspired an incredible opportunity to perpetuate and strengthen the values underlying our belief in the American dream. To do so, we have to commit to reversing the opportunity mobility trend and reviving the role and purpose of education. It is fundamentally American to seek increased economic and opportunity mobility. The hybrid college is an innovative and responsive redesign, essential to achieve the desired outcome of engaged citizens, economic prosperity, and a better life for all Americans—simply put, the American dream.

## About the Author

**Hanna Skandera** is the CEO of Mile High Strategies, the former secretary of education of New Mexico, and a former deputy chief of staff to the US secretary of education.

*The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.*

## Notes

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