COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

Complete College, America

Harnessing the Power of Higher Education to Renew American Democracy

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Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions. Specifically, CCA drives systemic change that leads to better college completion rates; more equitable outcomes; and greater economic and social mobility, especially for historically excluded students. CCA operates at the federal, state, and institutional levels and works with its national network of forward-thinking state and higher education leaders. Since its founding in 2009, CCA and its network have introduced bold initiatives that help states and institutions implement data-driven policies, student-centered perspectives, and equity-driven practices.

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Executive Summary

The crisis facing American democracy and the challenges plaguing the U.S. higher education system are two sides of the same coin. Eroding public trust, increasing inequality, and weakening civic engagement are not separate issues; they are deeply interconnected, systemic problems that affect both higher education and a range of national institutions.

The United States cannot hope to build a more just and equitable society without first reckoning with the failures of its colleges and universities. Higher education is a key part of both the problem and the solution. When higher education works well, it leads to better lives across a range of measures. But right now, U.S. higher education does not work well for everyone.

Unequal Education Opportunity Undermines Democracy

Higher education is an engine for economic mobility. Median annual earnings increase with education: Individuals who hold bachelor's degrees earn 44 percent more than those who hold associate degrees and 63 percent more than those who complete only high school.[1] A person living in the United States needs a college degree to have an income that even comes close to the U.S. median wage—and in many states the median wage does not always cover rent and basic needs.[2]

However, the opportunity to complete college is not truly available to everyone. As a result, the American dream is not realistically attainable for everyone—a fact that undercuts the egalitarian ideals the United States proclaims.

The United States Has a College Affordability–Completion Divide

Two intertwined factors significantly affect completion rates: exclusively full-time attendance and the financial resources that make exclusively full-time attendance possible. Exclusively full-time college attendance correlates with higher completion levels.

But attending college exclusively full time requires resources for tuition, living expenses, and often support for dependents. Most students cannot afford these costs, so they work. And students who work typically attend college part time. These factors create the college affordability–completion divide.

The Connection Between Higher Education and Democracy

Institutions that have significant money, have students with money, or both—because the two traits typically go together—have higher completion rates because they can bridge the college affordability–completion divide. And they do so because they have a higher proportion of students who attend college exclusively full time.

As a result, higher education today is not functioning as an engine of economic mobility as much as it is perpetuating an elite upper class. Moreover, it is not actively engaging students in civic education or helping students build the skills that are essential to participate in democracy. These systemic flaws in U.S. higher education stand in opposition to a vibrant democracy.

Higher Education Can and Must Help Renew American Democracy

Despite the challenges of U.S. higher education, it has the capacity to effect change on the individual, regional, and national levels.

Not only does earning power increase at every educational attainment level, but also higher education is positively correlated with better health; better well-being; increased likelihood to do work that fits with natural talents and interests; and, notably for citizenship and democracy, higher voting rates and greater volunteerism.[3, 4]

Indeed, higher education has a crucial role to play in civic engagement and safeguarding democracy. It can do so in three ways. Higher education can:

1. Make sure more students graduate;
2. Promote outcomes associated with civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of learning at all colleges and universities; and
3. Activate the student success community.

In addition, the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition represents a powerful response from the higher education community to the grave challenges facing U.S. democracy.

Next Steps for Higher Education

To truly transform higher education, all stakeholders must confront—and address—the deep inequities that pervade the field. None of this work will be easy. The obstacles are formidable, and resistance will be fierce. But higher education cannot afford to shy away from this challenge.

Complete College America calls on educators, policymakers, and citizens to act. The future of U.S. democracy depends, in no small part, on the strength and vitality of its colleges and universities. The road ahead will be long and difficult. But if educators, policymakers, and citizens are willing to embrace a vision of education that is truly inclusive and empowering, then the United States can build a higher education system—and a democracy—that work for everyone.

Democracy and Higher Education Are Interconnected

The crisis facing American democracy and the challenges plaguing the U.S. higher education system are two sides of the same coin. Eroding public trust, increasing inequality, and weakening civic engagement are not separate issues; they are deeply interconnected, systemic problems that affect both higher education and a range of national institutions.

The United States cannot hope to build a more just and equitable society without first reckoning with the failures of its colleges and universities. Higher education is a key part of both the problem and the solution. When higher education works well, it leads to better lives across a range of measures. But right now, U.S. higher education does not work well for everyone.

For too long, Americans have tolerated a two-tiered higher education system that perpetuates both privilege and inequity. A small number of elite institutions prepare a select few for lives of leadership and influence. Meanwhile, the vast majority of students—and most historically excluded students—are left to navigate a landscape of underfunded public colleges while incurring mounting debt. When higher education reinforces rather than decreases economic polarization, it undermines democracy.

Treating higher education as a private good rather than a public one undermines the very foundations of a participatory democracy. This approach has created a higher education system that not only is unjust but also is helping fuel the country's current democracy crisis.

All types of higher education can build skills and lead to credentials of value, including certificates and degrees. But the economic mobility that education promises depends on making opportunity a realistic option for everyone.

Complete College America (CCA) calls on higher education leaders and policymakers to reframe higher education as a public good that is truly available to all. This fundamental shift can help restore public trust in higher education, improve civic culture, and renew American democracy.

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A Two-Tiered Higher Education System Reinforces an Economically Divided Society

Higher education is an engine for economic mobility. Median annual earnings increase with education: Individuals who hold bachelor's degrees earn 44 percent more than those who hold associate degrees and 63 percent more than those who complete only high school.[5] A person living in the United States needs a college degree to have an income that even comes close to the U.S. median wage—and in many states the median wage does not always cover rent and basic needs.[6]

However, the opportunity to complete college is not truly available to everyone. As a result, the American dream is not realistically attainable for everyone—a fact that undercuts the egalitarian ideals the United States proclaims.

Since its founding, CCA has advocated for change that has challenged conventional higher education wisdom. For example, CCA has shown that student success reforms do not decrease enrollment and compromise quality but instead improve retention, which is the surest way to maintain enrollment. And CCA reforms, including guided pathways and corequisite education, help close institutional performance gaps and improve outcomes for students.

College leaders must continue these reforms at scale so they make the most of available resources. At the same time, college-level reforms alone cannot produce the completion rates the country needs because not enough students can afford to attend college in ways that allow them to complete. Until far more students can both attend and complete college, the United States will continue to have a college affordability–completion divide.

To understand this divide, look at the elite colleges and universities where higher education is most effective—and at what makes students at these institutions so successful.

Two intertwined factors significantly affect completion rates: exclusively full-time attendance and the financial resources that make exclusively full-time attendance possible. Exclusively full-time college attendance correlates with higher completion levels.

But attending college exclusively full time requires resources for tuition, living expenses, and often support for dependents. Most students cannot afford these costs, so they work. And students who work typically attend college part time. These factors create the college affordability–completion divide.

Affording Full-Time Attendance Is a Key Factor in Completion

College resources, paying for college, and student success are all linked. Institutions that have significant money, have students with money, or both—because the two traits typically go together—have higher completion rates because they can bridge the college affordability–completion divide. And they do so because they have a higher proportion of students who attend college exclusively full time (Figure 1, page 6).

More than eight in 10 students (84 percent) who attend *any* public, four-year university exclusively full time graduate within six years. At private, nonprofit four-year institutions, the rate jumps to 88 percent. Six-year completion rates for students who attend exclusively part time or who have mixed enrollment (a combination of part time and full time) are much lower.[7]

> College resources, paying for college, and student success are all linked.

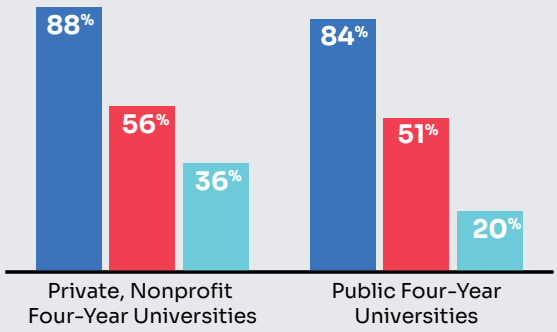
Selective enrollment colleges and universities, including Carnegie-classified Research 1 (R-1) public institutions, have the highest graduation rates. These colleges and universities admit fewer than one in two applicants and represent only 6 percent of postsecondary institutions, yet they hold nearly two-thirds of the postsecondary endowment revenue in the entire country.[8]

FIGURE 1

Exclusively Full-time College Attendance Correlates With Higher Completion Levels

Percentage of Students Graduating Within Six Years

- Exclusively full-time attendance
- Mixed attendance (a combination of part time and full time)
- Exclusively part-time attendance



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, November 2023, https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college

In addition to admitting many students from higher-income families, these institutions have the capital to provide significant financial assistance to students who cannot afford college. As a result, all students who enroll at these colleges and universities are encouraged to attend exclusively full time, and most are able to do so. These students, for the most part, are not fitting college around full-time employment or squeezing in Zoom classes while caring for children. They can afford to focus on academics.

These elite institutions also emphasize multidisciplinary learning, studies in the arts and sciences, and becoming a lifelong learner—all aspects of learning that strengthen democracy.

At public, open-enrollment, two- and four-year institutions, the approach is different. At these colleges and universities—the ones with which CCA typically works—the emphasis is on reform efforts to help more students earn more credits more quickly and to provide part-time students a route to success while working and handling family obligations. These institutions double down on workforce-related academic programs to help students obtain a living-wage job and meet local employers' needs.

CCA reforms—such as dual enrollment, corequisite support, and credit for competency—help colleges take big steps toward improving completion rates. To move the rest of the way, these reforms must be combined with reforms that close the college affordability–completion divide.

Closing the college affordability–completion divide would make college affordable—not just *more affordable,* but actually affordable—to all. It would ensure that the most important tool for economic mobility is accessible to the students who most need economic mobility. And it would fix the nation's two-tiered education system, which works exceptionally well for a small group of students but does not effectively serve the majority of students, the national economy, or the U.S. democracy.

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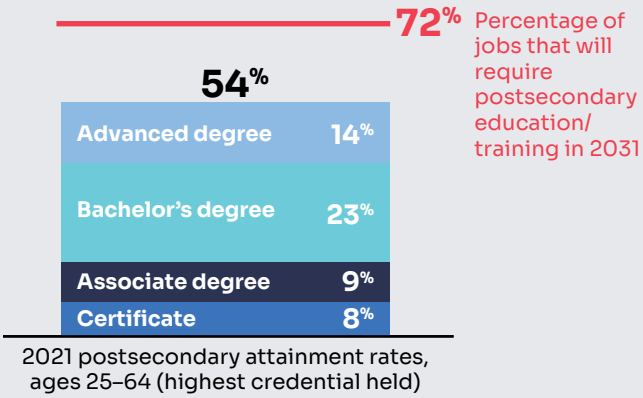
The National Economy Depends on Higher Education

Just as U.S. democracy and higher education are interconnected, the U.S. labor market depends on higher education for its long-term success. By 2031, 72 percent of U.S. jobs will require education or training beyond high school.[9]

The United States is not on track to meet these employment needs (Figure 2). Moreover, educational attainment in the United States is being outpaced by the other 37 democratic, market-driven nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). By 2030, the OECD average is set to surpass the United States in the percentage of credential holders.[10] For more information about how higher education can better meet labor market needs, see CCA's *Ending Unfunded Mandates in Higher Education: Using Completion-Goals Funding to Improve Accountability and Outcomes.*[11]

FIGURE 2

The United States is Falling Short of Meeting Its Employment Needs



Sources: Lumina Foundation, https://bit.ly/4720zhv; Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, https://bit.ly/46BXyFr

An Economically Divided Society Undermines U.S. Democracy

The Economist Intelligence Unit releases an annual Democracy Index, which provides a snapshot on the global state of democracy.[12] The Democracy Index assesses countries on five categories of democracy-related metrics: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation, and political culture.

In the 2023 Democracy Index, the United States ranked 29th, behind countries including Taiwan, Germany, Canada, Australia, Uruguay, Japan, the United Kingdom, South Korea, France, and Spain. The United States scored 7.85 on a 0–10 scale, which puts the country in the *flawed democracy* category, below 24 full democracies including those just mentioned and ahead of *hybrid regimes* and *authoritarian* governments.[13] This result is a dramatic drop from 15 years ago, when the United States scored 8.22, was part of the *full democracy* category, and ranked 18th overall (ahead of many of the aforementioned countries).[14]

U.S. higher education is deeply connected to sustaining American democracy, just as it is the gateway to better opportunities for individuals and a thriving national economy. But despite significant improvements in recent years, today's higher education system is not accomplishing essential elements of its mission.

Higher education today is not functioning as an engine of economic mobility as much as it is perpetuating an elite upper class. Moreover, it is not actively engaging students in civic education or helping students build the skills that are essential to participate in democracy. These systemic flaws in U.S. higher education stand in opposition to a vibrant democracy.

Becoming numb to the role of higher education in perpetuating economic division means not only missing a critical point in advancing the completion agenda but also ignoring a critical factor in the country's current national democracy crisis. Exclusively full-time attendance is closely tied to completion and the economic mobility that accompanies completion. But exclusively full-time attendance is possible only when students or their institutions can fund it. Thus, a system in which only selective colleges can consistently enroll students exclusively full time perpetuates class-based inequality. It also breeds discontent with higher education among those who are consistently unable to access it. This discontent further undermines both education and democracy.

Equal access to higher education—specifically having the realistic ability to complete rather than just having the option of entering—can help resolve the nation's current polarization and dysfunction.

College completion champions—practitioners and policymakers alike—must focus on the causal chain between institutional resources and college affordability, college affordability and full-time attendance, and full-time attendance and college completion.

At Ivy Plus colleges, more students come from the top 1 percent of U.S. income distribution than from the bottom 50 percent.[15, 16] (Ivy Pus colleges include the eight Ivy League colleges plus other highly selective institutions, such as Duke University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago.)

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The inequity is even more stark at the highest income levels. A student from a family in the top 0.1 percent of U.S. income distribution has about a 40 percent chance of going to an Ivy League or other elite college. A student from a family in the bottom quintile of income has a less than 0.5 percent chance of admission to these colleges. In other words, someone from a family with an income in the top 0.1 percent is roughly 100 times more likely to attend an elite college than someone born in the bottom quintile.[17, 18]

Moreover, compared to colleges nationally, Ivy League universities are less than half as likely to enroll Pell Grant recipients even though the collective endowments of these institutions total roughly $200 billion.[19]

> The result is a higher education system that dramatically favors those who already enjoy privilege and barely props the door open for those who most need economic mobility.

These disparities multiply across generations. Ivy Plus graduates are disproportionally represented in the top 1 percent of earners as well as in positions of power, including CEOs, U.S. senators, and employees of prestigious firms.

The result is a higher education system that dramatically favors those who already enjoy privilege and barely props the door open for those who most need economic mobility: working learners, those from families with low household income, those from neglected or forgotten communities, and any populations that have been historically excluded from higher education.

Having a realistic ability to complete college is central to improving college attainment. When this option is not truly available to all, opportunity is unequal. And unequal opportunity cuts against the bedrock principles on which the United States was founded. In a true democracy, college completion—the most reliable predictor of true economic mobility—cannot be open to some Americans and closed to others.

Diminished Faith in Fairness, Higher Education, and Democracy Are All Connected

If exclusively full-time attendance is the price of full participation in the U.S. economy, then higher education—state leaders as well as leaders of open-access and selective institutions—should be working to help more students attend college in this way. At present, however, the U.S. public postsecondary system is not equipped for this task.

Thus, the United States currently has a two-tiered postsecondary system—one for the haves, and one for the have-nots. Most people in America, whether or not they attend college, are aware of this divided system. As a result, trust in public higher education has eroded. This loss of trust in public higher education contributes to a loss of trust in U.S. public institutions at all levels—a loss that is perilous for those who cherish democratic participation and strong citizenship.

Why Americans Are Losing Trust in U.S. Higher Education

Only 36 percent of Americans have confidence in U.S. higher education,[20] which means that barely a third of Americans have confidence in the country's primary mechanism for bettering one's life. This 36 percent is a drop from 57 percent—which was still not a ringing endorsement—in 2015.[21]

CCA believes that three recent trends have contributed to current distrust in higher education.

1. Americans are wise to the flawed system. Americans view higher education as a ladder to wealth for some and a debt trap for others. The sticker price for Ivy Plus and some other selective institutions now approaches nearly $100,000 per year,[22] an amount almost double annual median income.[23] Even though this figure does not reflect scholarships and grants, which can lower costs, it frames perceptions that college is out of reach and stokes fears about paying for higher education. Moreover, even with tuition discounts, the price tag is still very high.

Open-access two- and four-year colleges have much lower tuition. However, they also have fewer resources, typically serve students with greater needs, and have lower outcomes than selective colleges that can accommodate exclusively full-time attendance, along with highly paid professors and built-in alumni networks.

2. The public, open-enrollment college system is not working. Degree completion rates at public, open-enrollment colleges are stagnant. The latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse shows that in 2023, degree attainment at these institutions dropped by 3 percent,[24] likely due to the double-digit pandemic-related enrollment drop-off from which the country has yet to recover.[25]

College completion rates have increased in some areas, such as full-time graduation rates for community college students. However, these gains do not stack up relative to the completion rates of colleges hosting exclusively full-time students. The four-year graduation rate at nonselective, public four-year colleges is 38 percent. For community colleges, the on-time completion rate is 18 percent. While this rate shows great improvement over the past decade, it still is shockingly low.

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These results can be attributed to a combination of factors, including resources, policies, and practices, but the bottom line is clear: The economic mobility engine that the nation relies on does not effectively serve most students.

3. The media fixate on wealthy institutions, rather than on economic mobility concerns. Higher education pundits focus almost exclusively on the top of the pyramid. They consistently examine the perils of well-off institutions—their challenges and their failures—despite the fact that taken together, these institutions represent fewer than one in 10 higher education students.

The higher education stories with the most play in the past year include Ivy Plus presidents called to testify before Congress to address on-campus politics around the Israel–Gaza war. Before that, the dominant higher education stories focused on affirmative action—and exposed not just new hurdles for selective-enrollment institutions intent on diverse class composition but also the legacy admissions and other practices that unfairly prop up the wealthy in the applicant pool, regardless of affirmative action use.

These recent stories are not insignificant. The Israel–Gaza war, for example, has real ramifications for students' sense of belonging—not just at selective-enrollment, well-resourced colleges and universities but also at the higher education institutions that educate the large majority of students.

> News stories about higher education—the engine of economic mobility in the United States—continue to focus on the shortcomings of the elites while forgetting the open-access institutions that are the essence of that engine.

Similarly, the end of affirmative action was covered widely, although it also focused more on selective institutions than on the perils of historically excluded students. And indeed, the end of affirmative action has real implications for which students will be admitted to the colleges and universities that can most readily confer economic mobility.

Other national higher education stories—including the student loan debt debate and its ongoing, incremental cancellation, as well as the 2024 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) rollout—also received attention. However, pundits in the news media disproportionately focus on the well-off when discussing higher education.

For example, in the 2023 *New York Times Magazine* issue that was ostensibly all about higher education—and who is included and who is excluded—community colleges were mentioned only twice, both times in lists in subordinate clauses. Between the almost complete absence of community colleges and the large absence of open-access four-year institutions, the issue was emblematic of media missing the majority of students.[26] Media portrayal of community colleges is still at the level of the TV show "Community."

News stories about higher education—the engine of economic mobility in the United States—continue to focus on the shortcomings of the elites while forgetting the open-access institutions that are the essence of that engine. As more attention is directed toward the pitfalls and pratfalls of the well-off of higher education, the more Americans are "rankled by certain aspects of how elite institutions have behaved and what they represent."[27]

Rebuilding Trust in U.S. Higher Education and U.S. Democracy

These concerns about U.S. higher education—the problematic perceptions and the actual low attainment rates—undermine U.S. democracy in multiple ways. For example, loss of faith in the institution of higher education erodes faith that democracy propels opportunity. In addition, because adults with higher levels of education are more active citizens,[28] low attainment rates lead to a less civically engaged population.

CCA's work to improve low completion rates can help rebuild trust in higher education and renew American democracy. For example, CCA:

- Has built a nationwide network of states, systems, and consortia that are working to improve student outcomes.
- Supports bipartisan calls for accountability among open-access two-year and four-year institutions.
- Promotes strategies and practices that improve completion rates.

> To make the system fair and build public trust—and thus increase the political participation and improve the civic culture that predict democratic engagement—higher education must both do better with currently available resources *and* make college affordable enough for far more students to attend exclusively full time.

These efforts have led to results:

- In the past decade, almost all CCA Alliance members have improved on-time graduation rates for students pursuing two- and four-year degrees, and many have more than doubled on-time graduation rates in the past five years alone.
- Alliance members have collectively produced more than 100,000 more graduates than they would have without reforms.
- CCA estimates that these graduates contribute at least $3 billion to the national gross domestic product each year.

When higher education conventional wisdom said that college had great value no matter the cost, CCA countered that America needs more degrees that lead to good jobs—and less time and money wasted on classes and practices that do not lead to college completion. When many complained that the student success reform movement would somehow decrease enrollment and lower quality, CCA demonstrated that paying attention to student success actually improves retention, which is the best way to maintain and boost enrollment. When others blamed poor K–12 preparation and said students were not college ready, CCA advocated for policies, perspectives, and practices—including guided pathways, corequisite education, caseload advising, and curricular reforms—that have been directly linked to dramatic increases in retention, graduation, and economic mobility.[29, 30]

These changes have made a measurable impact. However, in and of themselves, reforms will not produce 100 percent college completion.

To make the system fair and build public trust—and thus increase the political participation and improve the civic culture that predict democratic engagement—higher education must both do better with currently available resources *and* make college affordable enough for far more students to attend exclusively full time. College leaders, advocates, and policymakers still have a moral responsibility to implement proven practices at scale. Higher education must be both adequately funded and efficient with resources.

The G.I. Bill and the Truman Commission: Strong but Flawed Models of Student Support

Starting in June 1944, before World War II even ended, the United States began investing heavily in postsecondary education. In the seven years after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act—better known as the G.I. Bill—into law, approximately 8 million veterans received educational benefits to attend colleges and universities or receive training. The number of degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities more than doubled between 1940 and 1950, and the percentage of Americans with bachelor's or advanced degrees rose from 4.6 percent in 1945 to 25 percent a half-century later.[31]

In 1947, the President's Commission on Higher Education—better known as the Truman Commission—issued the first two volumes of its report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*. The combination of the G.I. Bill and the Truman Commission revolutionized U.S. higher education—for some Americans.

The principles behind the G.I. Bill and the Truman Commission report helped propel America forward at a critical time in history. These historic milestones were a model in their time. They also were of their time and thus primarily benefitted White men. Black veterans were not able to take full advantage of G.I. Bill benefits available to White veterans, and women were not part of the picture at all.

While these measures helped create or perpetuate the inequities CCA now works to address, it is worth remembering the ideals they presented—and applying today's standards for inclusion to them.

The United States began investing more in higher education for many reasons—not just for workforce training. Certainly, leaders were focused on moving America forward economically and technologically, and they saw education as a tool to combat communism. But those goals do not tell the full story.

The Truman Commission formally delineated the human, civic, and public needs that higher education should address—and highlighted the need to preserve democracy itself through colleges and universities.

Trust that the American people would succeed in college was connected to the goal of preserving the American way of life. The emphasis was on general education that would lead to an "abundant personal life" and "a stronger, freer social order." With regard to workforce preparation, the Truman Commission sought a society that "recognize[d] the equal dignity of all kinds of work, and so erase[d] distinctions based on occupational classes."[32]

Higher education was defined as a public good and a democracy lifeline, in addition to an economic engine.

As one contemporaneous study concluded, "The G.I. Bill of Rights is giving veterans the chance for which thousands of them had never dared hope—an opportunity to 'make more money,' 'be somebody,' or 'do what they have always wanted to do' through furthering their education. This opportunity, which is embodied in a monthly allowance from the government to the veteran for the sole purpose of study and training, is one of the greatest steps in democracy ever taken by any nation. Even the taxpayer's grumbles are muffled, and for us all it is of absorbing interest to learn how the veteran is availing himself of the chance to carve a career. What does he want to be?"[33]

As today's policymakers and educators determine steps forward, they can take lessons from even the flawed and exclusionary models of the past—and apply today's standards for inclusion to them.

Workforce Focus, Civic Learning, and the Definition of Value in Higher Education

Today's higher education has lost the spirit of the G.I. Bill and the Truman Commission (see sidebar, page 13).

The student success movement of the past decade embodies only half of the G.I. Bill's lessons. Like the G.I. Bill, today's approach to higher education reform believes that today's incoming, first-generation-in-college students can succeed, and even outperform, the students who in the past were considered "typical."

But trust in students alone does not help students succeed. In 1944, and for decades after, the United States did not ask students to assume the burden of full-time work alongside full-time studies.

As noted previously, 84 percent of students who attend *any* public, four-year university exclusively full time graduate within six years. At private, nonprofit four-year institutions, the rate jumps to 88 percent. For all other students, six-year completion rates are much lower (Figure 1, page 6).

Whether students are paying for college with household resources or financial aid, these exclusively full-time students can afford not just tuition and fees but also books, technology, and basic living expenses. This approach reflects what veterans received under the G.I. Bill, which included a book allowance and a living stipend.

Many of today's students are attending college part time because they cannot afford to attend full time and pay for living expenses. The level of student need is reflected in the fact that colleges across the country now provide basic needs support for their students.

Depending on colleges to fill gaps in basic needs is emblematic of today's problems in higher education. The system is not sustainable for students or colleges.

Yet instead of helping more students attend college exclusively full time so the United States can meet its economic needs—and stay true to its democratic ideals—the nation has shifted the purpose of higher education. In the past few decades, higher education has emphasized workforce-related academic programs.

> Depending on colleges to fill gaps in basic needs is emblematic of today's problems in higher education. The system is not sustainable for students or colleges.

What Students Study

The Truman Commission placed strong emphasis on general education and also recommended that "education for democratic living ... should become ... a primary aim of all classroom teaching ... and of every phase of campus life."[34]

At well-resourced institutions, the most popular majors are those emphasized in the Truman Commission: economics, government, political science, sciences such as biology and physiology, and social sciences. This type of education produces graduates who are prepared for careers rather than jobs—and who are ready for a lifetime of learning and participating in democracy. But these colleges serve too few undergraduates to safeguard democracy in the way the Truman Commission authors envisioned.

Across higher education overall, business and health care majors dominate. The community college mission is, of course, the one that is most explicitly vocational. Thus, the choice of major shifts toward the practical in accordance with the resources of colleges, universities, and their students.

The Role of Colleges in Maintaining Democracy

Along with these shifts, postsecondary education has moved away from teaching courses that emphasize civic engagement and democratic learning. Not enough students experience civic engagement, such as service learning and community projects. These civic engagement efforts prepare students to contribute to democracy and teach skills that employers value.[35]

For this reason, colleges and universities across the country are being more intentional about addressing democracy and civic engagement. For example, the City University of New York (CUNY) has embraced civic mobility alongside economic mobility as a key part of its mission,[36] and Piedmont Virginia Community College is interweaving civic learning and democracy engagement principles into its academic pathways.[37]

These efforts notwithstanding, the best-resourced colleges and universities—which can sustain exclusively full-time enrollment and offer a broader range of civic engagement opportunities—serve few students relative to the overall U.S. population. In fact, these institutions paradoxically undermine the country's democratic aspirations because they perpetuate opportunity for so few students.

As a result, public perceptions of higher education weaken, along with faith in democracy and the ability to participate in democracy. The engine itself is sputtering.

> Not enough students experience civic engagement, such as service learning and community projects. These civic engagement efforts prepare students to contribute to democracy and teach skills that employers value.

Time Is Still the Enemy—and So Is Affordability

Given the correlation between full-time attendance and college completion, it is no coincidence that many student success reforms focus on time and its relationship to learning. Some reform efforts manage time: Purposeful career advising, structured semester-by-semester academic plans, and predictive and block schedules all help students manage their lives around college, instead of the other way around. Other reforms, such as credit for competency that awards credits for prior learning in the workplace, corequisite remediation, and dual enrollment while in high school, divorce learning from time.

Since its founding, CCA has focused on the plight of part-time students. Its *Time Is the Enemy* report broke down the statistics and presented reforms.[38] The report emphasized the needs of historically excluded students and students from under-resourced families, where institutional performance gaps were, and still are, greatest. CCA also led out the national "15 to Finish" campaign, promoting full-time attendance to promote on-time graduation.

Such reforms, while essential and leading toward incremental gains,[39] are not enough because of the affordability–completion link—the connection between completing and being able to afford to attend college exclusively full time. As a result, the students who most need college for economic mobility are the most likely to work while they are in college, and therefore, they are the least likely to complete. Thus, students from under-resourced families must overcome obstacles related to both resources and time, making college completion less accessible to them and thereby undermining the democracy aspect of higher education.

Resources. Most students at open-access institutions are not able to attend exclusively full time not because they do not want to but because they cannot afford to. From 1993 to today, inflation-adjusted, published

tuition and fee rates increased by more than half at public two-year colleges and doubled at public four-year colleges.[40] Meanwhile, the maximum Pell Grant peaked in the 1970s, when it was worth more than three-fourths of the average cost of attendance at a four-year public college or university; it is now worth roughly one-third of the cost.[41]

The increasing expenses of college are compounded by the inflated costs of living. While the costs of smartphones and TVs have fallen, the costs of health care, privatized child care, rent, and food have risen significantly.[42] As a result, many colleges now must provide basic needs support for their students.

While these efforts are both essential and laudable, they put an additional burden on the colleges that are least well resourced, which also are the ones most likely to serve historically excluded students.

Time. College students are made to take more time to complete in multiple ways, including prerequisite-driven remediation, lack of institutional acceptance of credit for prior learning, courses not being offered when students need them, or unstructured academic planning.

With living expenses and tuition outpacing wages, students are forced to work and thus attend part time. Two-thirds of the nation's 10 million community college students attend part time.[43] Sixty-two percent of part-time students say working determines how they are enrolled, and about 30 percent of all community college students work full time.

> Many students take out loans and do not complete their degrees … . These students obtain marginal benefit from college attendance but lack the true employment gains that come from earning a credential—and they retain debt that continues to accumulate due to interest. This cycle hits historically excluded students the hardest.

Recent scholarship has found causal links between college attrition and working 20 hours per week, with severely deleterious effects when students work 28 hours per week. The impact is worst for Pell Grant recipients who also are working students.[44] Being poor has been shown to reduce a person's cognitive capacity more than going a full night without sleep; when students have to study at night after working all day, they lose literal nights of sleep as well.[45]

In addition to the challenges of time and resources, students must navigate a maze of obstacles to complete college. These obstacles include:

Debt. The inability to afford college attendance has a direct, and under-reported, link to the student loan debt crisis. As of 2017, about nine in 10 students who had defaulted on student loans within 12 years of enrolling in college had received a Pell Grant at some point, which means they had likely entered college with an annual household income under $40,000.

The growth of for-profit colleges and universities when online education became readily available also led to increasing rates of student loan debt and an increased risk of default.[46]

Finally, many students take out loans and do not complete their degrees, often for justifiable but potentially avoidable reasons. These students obtain marginal benefit from college attendance but lack the true employment gains that come from earning a credential— and they retain debt that continues to accumulate due to interest. This cycle hits historically excluded students the hardest. A third of White students who borrowed money but did not complete their studies defaulted on their loans, a rate that increases to 41 percent for Latinx students and 55 percent for Black students.[47]

Bureaucracy. Much like in other public sectors, in higher education bureaucracy gets in the way of helping students access the supports and financial aid they need to attend full time—and to succeed. This bureaucracy further enervates trust in public goods and thus in the American democratic system itself. Matthew Desmond puts the predicament in the broadest terms in his book *Poverty, by America:* "Americans are not taking full advantage of government programs for a much more banal reason: We've made it hard and confusing."[48]

Public colleges and universities are as guilty as any of obscuring designated aid and having burdensome application and registration processes. They provide catalogs of hundreds of alphabetized programs, ask students to cobble together their requirements on their own, and offer high school equivalency courses masquerading as college coursework. Even as colleges increasingly adopt CCA reforms to put students on pathways, provide academic plans, and use those plans to drive schedules, colleges often do not have enough advisors to help point students to new technological, financial, and academic resources.

Financial aid process. Instead of the free community college the United States had decades ago, colleges and students must manage a complex, bureaucratic financial aid process. From the college perspective, colleges devote resources to managing this process—so some students can get funding—rather than giving more resources to more students. Even states that have rolled out tuition-free community college initiatives typically require students to submit the FAFSA.

From the student perspective, the FAFSA debacle of 2024 rendered applying for financial aid a Kafka-esque nightmare. Even before that, students who needed to get and maintain financial aid had to know arcane rules and acronyms, such as R2T4 (Return to Title IV), a federal regulation that prorates ultimate disbursement against percentage of semester enrolled, and SAP (Satisfactory Academic Progress). If a student loses aid, a little-known appeals process gives them the "opportunity" to essentially perform their poverty and tragedy as an acceptable excuse for academic hiccups.

> Overall trust in higher education is falling. Trust in other national institutions ... also has declined. When a country's citizens are distrustful of governmental systems, democracy flails.

The Connection Between Affordability and Democracy

As public higher education becomes increasingly unaffordable for those who most need economic mobility, many would-be students, graduates with debt, and dropouts increasingly mistrust what they see as an unfair system. Meanwhile, traditional-age students attending expensive colleges and universities full time, as well as their parents, become resentful of having to pay taxes to prop up the failing lower-tier system.

These two factors create a vicious cycle of distrust in the public good, stagnant or declining funding, and stagnant or declining college attainment rates, which are already far too low for an optimally functioning labor economy.

These challenges support a narrative that higher education unfairly benefits the wealthy and buries the working poor in debt. These perceptions do not apply to open-access institutions, but overall trust in higher education is falling. Trust in other national institutions, including courts and law enforcement, also has declined.

When a country's citizens are distrustful of governmental systems, democracy flails. For example, those stopped by the police (but not arrested) are less likely to vote. The criminal-legal system, scholars note, trains people for a distinctive and lesser kind of citizenship.[49]

It is time to get back to a reality in which college is a fair chance for economic mobility. Ensuring this shift—and wrapping civic learning back into college—will make college a real opportunity for all.[50]

Higher Education Can and Must Help Renew American Democracy

Despite the challenges of U.S. higher education, it has the capacity to effect change on the individual, regional, and national levels.

Not only does earning power increase at every educational attainment level, but higher education also is positively correlated with better health; better well-being; increased likelihood to do work that fits with natural talents and interests; and, notably for citizenship and democracy, higher voting rates and greater volunteerism.[51, 52]

Indeed, higher education has a crucial role to play in civic engagement and safeguarding democracy. It can do so in three ways. Higher education can:

1. Make sure more students graduate;
2. Promote outcomes associated with civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of learning at all colleges and universities; and
3. Activate the student success community.

1. Make sure more students graduate

After World War II, successive presidencies—administrations from both political parties—indicated that college completion was explicitly needed for democratic engagement. With the erosion of that connection, and with the increasing unaffordability of college attendance, the country has been left with low graduation rates, large debts, economic and social inequity, and severe distrust of one of government's largest functions. Not only do fewer students learn about American democracy, in all its potential and peril, but students also have front row seats to public goods not working well.

The first order of business is to make college work well—an effort CCA has been spearheading since its inception. To work well, colleges should:

1. **Implement evidence-driven reforms that work.** Follow the four CCA Pillars of Transformation. From their first semester, students should have purposeful academic intent aligned with personal aspirations and career pathways. The roadmap to get there should be structured, semester by semester, along a predictable schedule so they can manage their lives around college instead of the other way around. They should have momentum to progress rapidly through their plan, including through credit for learning in both high school and the workforce. They should not be forced to take math and English readiness work that does not count for college credit. Finally, they should have the wraparound academic, advising, and basic needs supports required to succeed in college.
2. **Use a comprehensive measurement system.** Use metrics, and the data that supports them, to ensure that reform efforts become entrenched in the technical and cultural systems required for sustained change. Colleges should determine what they want to measure; know the data requirements to populate their metrics; and ensure strong reporting about their metrics, including benchmarking reports through tools such as the National Student Clearinghouse Postsecondary Data Partnership. Most importantly, colleges must use metrics, data, and reports to ensure that all levels of the college, university, system, or state agency are having the right data-driven conversations at the right times to best depict—and then improve—students' reality. Start with CCA's guidebook and spreadsheet-based tool.

> Not only does earning power increase at every educational attainment level, but higher education also is positively correlated with better health; better well-being; increased likelihood to do work that fits with natural talents and interests; and, notably for citizenship and democracy, higher voting rates and greater volunteerism.

3. **Advocate to fund colleges and universities with state-based attainment goals.** Outcomes-based funding was a major, positive shift. It changed the incentive from increasing enrollment to meeting the college's mission of producing successful alumni. The next step in this shift requires ending unfunded mandates through completion-goals funding, as CCA has advocated. Completion-goals funding includes resourcing student success imperatives up front; doing so based on what is known to be required for an optimal labor economy; and prioritizing accountability to stated plans, processes, and existing student-centered policies.

These three actions require a comprehensive approach to student success—one that involves multiple faculty and staff working together.

Actions that improve student success can meet the imperatives for a thriving democracy as well as a strong workforce—but only if they include all students. In addition, student success leaders and policymakers must stay flexible in terms of using artificial intelligence (AI), the biggest technological shift higher education has ever seen. Specifically, colleges should consider the following:

- As CCA firmly states, there is no middle ground when it comes to equitable student success. College leaders must acknowledge that students with different needs will require different student success interventions—and consider the interactions between various students' needs and the part-time attendance predicament. Higher education also must acknowledge that to meet completion goals, colleges must close gaps by removing policies, perspectives, and practices that marginalize BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, People of Color) students, students from under-resourced families, and others who were historically excluded.

  American democracy and higher education both have histories rife with exclusion, so college and university leaders must prioritize inclusion, not just to improve graduation rates for all students but also to lead through action on what democracy should actually look like. To effectively implement policies that lead to transformational change in higher education, colleges must identify strategies that go beyond good intentions—strategies that work at scale and affect systems, structures, institutional culture, and the foundational ways colleges and universities operate. This work involves moving past boutique programs that benefit only a small number of students to incorporating pedagogical solutions inside the classroom, combining CCA strategies when applicable, providing explicit supports to stakeholders for consistent and effective implementation, and leveraging the collective expertise and lived experiences of policymakers to identify and address potential unintended consequences.

- Generative AI will transform higher education—in the classroom and in student service—as well as the job competencies required from degrees and certificates. Although it is too early to say, AI competence likely will increasingly become a necessity for entry-level jobs available to those with undergraduate degrees—the types of jobs that provide living wages and steep enough career ladders to make a meaningful contribution to overall economic mobility.[53] If, however, the colleges with the most resources are the only ones able to confer AI competency quickly and broadly, their graduates will attain an insurmountable competitive advantage in the labor marketplace. Economic mobility in the country then will stagnate, driving further income inequality and exacerbating the anti-democratic factors of the present higher education system. For this reason, CCA created the Council on AI Equity and a guidebook for immediate improvement of student success via generative AI. Generative AI has turned continuous improvement from a buzzword, or a project management afterthought, into a specific mission with a built-in toolset.

> Actions that improve student success can meet the imperatives for a thriving democracy as well as a strong workforce—but only if they include all students.

2. Promote outcomes associated with civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of learning at all colleges and universities

To fulfill higher education's potential as an engine of democracy, colleges and universities must prioritize civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of study. This approach not only enhances students' civic knowledge and skills but also contributes significantly to broader institutional goals, including improved graduation rates, retention, and overall student success.

Recent research provides compelling evidence about the positive impact of community-based and civic engagement practices on student outcomes. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) presented a comprehensive meta-analysis of this research.[54] This meta-analysis concluded that participation in service learning, community-based engagement, and other civic-oriented high-impact practices (HIPs) is associated with several positive outcomes, including increased likelihood of graduation, higher credit completion, and improved retention rates. Specifically, the study revealed that students who participated in service learning were more likely to continue their studies, complete more credit hours, and ultimately graduate. The overall suggestion is that integrating civic engagement experiences into the curriculum can be a powerful tool for improving overall student success.

Moreover, the benefits of these practices, as identified across multiple studies in the meta-analysis, extend beyond individual student outcomes to institution-level improvements. For example, one study found that university–community partnerships led to several institutional advantages, including the implementation of collaborative and participatory pedagogies and increased student engagement in collaborative and mutual learning.

Importantly, the positive effects of civic engagement practices appear to be particularly significant for historically excluded student populations. Several studies noted that the impacts of community-based practices were either unaffected by student background or were more beneficial to historically excluded students than to their wealthier or White peers. For instance, the Metro College Success Program at San Francisco State University found that community-based engagement had more substantial benefits for under-represented students than for their peers (see sidebar, page 21).

These findings align with CCA's mission to improve college completion rates and promote equitable outcomes. By integrating civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of study, institutions can simultaneously advance their civic mission and improve key metrics such as retention and graduation rates. This approach can be particularly effective in addressing persistent equity gaps in higher education.

To effectively promote these outcomes, institutions should consider the following strategies from the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE) Coalition, in which CCA is a lead partner:

- Create opportunities for reasoned and evidence-based discussions, teach the skills needed to work with those who hold differing views, and instill a collaborative approach to problem solving;
- Engage students in core issues related to democracy, freedom, and political systems that support and oppose liberty;
- Require practical experiences designed to prepare students for civic and ethical responsibility both in society and in their careers; and
- Support students' work on public good questions that matter to them and matter to society.

> To fulfill higher education's potential as an engine of democracy, colleges and universities must prioritize civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of study.

By implementing these strategies and prioritizing civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of study, institutions can create a more engaged and civically minded student body while simultaneously improving key institutional outcomes. This approach aligns with CCA's goal of transforming higher education to better serve all students and contribute to a more equitable and democratic society.

As colleges continue to address the challenges facing American democracy and higher education, integrating civic engagement throughout the curriculum offers a powerful solution. By fostering students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions alongside their academic and career preparation, colleges can create graduates who are not only successful in their chosen fields but also active and engaged citizens committed to strengthening democratic institutions.

> By fostering students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions alongside their academic and career preparation, colleges can create graduates who are not only successful in their chosen fields but also active and engaged citizens committed to strengthening democratic institutions.

Metro College Success Program Demonstrates the Value of Civic Learning

The Metro College Success Program at **San Francisco State University** leverages civic learning and engagement as a cornerstone of its student success strategy. Students in the Metro program follow a career-themed general education pathway within a cohort model for their first two years so they are part of a supportive academic community. A drop-in center staffed by peer mentors supports students in navigating bureaucratic barriers so they are more likely to persist.

In upper-division general education courses, such as the SF Living Lab, students critically analyze social justice issues within the context of the Bay Area's political economy. This comprehensive curricular and holistic approach to student success empowers students to view themselves as both local and global citizens, as well as professional workers equipped to advance social good in their communities and future careers.

The Metro program supports its faculty through a learning community focused on providing engaging, top-quality instruction on a large scale. The Metro program has successfully eliminated the gap in graduation rates for its historically excluded students compared to a matched comparison group and their more advantaged peers.[55]

3. Activate the student success community

Student success personnel will play a critical role in anchoring both student success and CLDE principles in every student's educational experience.

Professional college advisors should:

- Integrate civic learning and democratic engagement into academic advising conversations, helping students connect their academic pathways to their roles as active citizens.
- Encourage students to participate in high-impact practices that promote civic engagement, such as service learning, community-based research, and internships with public-serving organizations.
- Connect students with resources and support services that address basic needs and promote mental health because these supports are essential foundations for academic success and civic participation.
- Collaborate with faculty and student affairs professionals to create seamless pathways that integrate civic learning across students' academic and co-curricular experiences.
- Advocate for equitable access to civic learning opportunities, and work proactively to engage students from under-resourced communities.

Leaders in student affairs and student life should:

- Develop co-curricular programming that fosters civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, such as dialogues on public issues, voter education and mobilization efforts, and leadership development programs.
- Create and sustain a campus climate that emphasizes diversity, inclusion, and free expression, and recognizes these values as essential elements of a thriving democracy.
- Partner with academic affairs to create integrated learning experiences that connect classroom learning with real-world civic engagement.
- Provide training and support for student affairs staff to effectively facilitate civic learning and engage students in productive dialogue across differences.

Faculty should, as appropriate:

- Incorporate civic learning outcomes into course syllabi and assessments, and help students see the relevance of their learning to their roles as citizens.
- Use active and collaborative pedagogies that foster skills in critical thinking, perspective taking, and problem solving.
- Engage students with real-world public issues and problems, using the campus and community as a living laboratory for civic learning.
- Model and foster respectful dialogue and deliberation, and encourage students to engage with diverse perspectives and form their own evidence-based views.
- Connect students with opportunities to continue their civic learning beyond the first year, such as service learning courses, community-based research, and capstone projects.

CLDE Coalition: A Powerful Response

The CLDE Coalition represents a powerful response from the higher education community to the grave challenges facing U.S. democracy. The coalition aims to accelerate the vital work of infusing civic learning and democratic engagement throughout postsecondary education. Its lead organizations are AAC&U, Campus Compact, College Promise, CCA, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

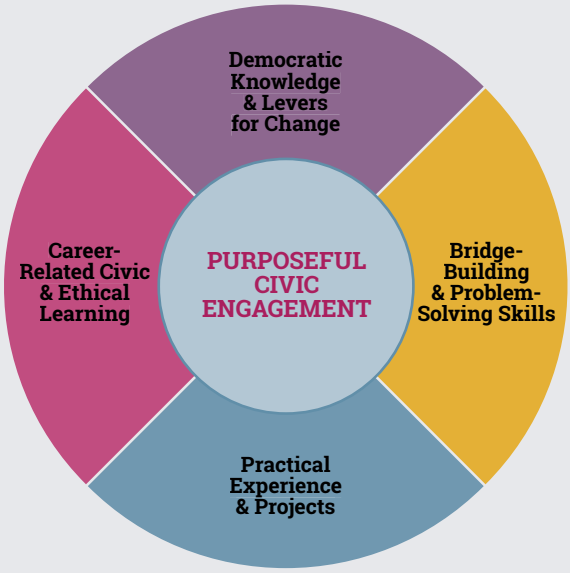
Research suggests that civic engagement is a powerful tool for advancing college completion and success, underscoring that this work is not a diversion from higher education's core goals but a strategy for achieving them.

Far too many students are currently missing out on the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for informed and effective participation in civic life. Students from traditionally under-resourced communities are least likely to participate in civic learning, a divide that perpetuates long-standing inequities in U.S. democracy. The vibrant civic learning movement emerging across U.S. higher education offers hope, but as the CLDE Coalition recognizes, civic learning remains optional for too many students.

To fulfill higher education's potential as an engine of democracy, the coalition has set forth an ambitious new framework for college civic learning and democracy engagement. The framework centers on the overarching goal of helping each student develop purposeful civic engagement. Toward that end, four intersecting forms of civic learning extend across students' educational pathways:

- Democratic knowledge and levers for change;
- Bridge-building and problem-solving skills;
- Practical experience and projects; and
- Career-related civic and ethical learning.

The CLDE Framework



> Research suggests that civic engagement is a powerful tool for advancing college completion and success, underscoring that this work is not a diversion from higher education's core goals but a strategy for achieving them.

Every postsecondary institution can and should make civic learning and democracy engagement a priority—and each can do so in its own way. The CLDE Framework is suggestive, not prescriptive. Every institution can implement the framework in ways that work for its mission, its students, and the communities it serves.

> Majorities of voters across party lines support civic education and believe that students should engage with multiple viewpoints. This data suggests that there is a powerful appetite for civic learning.

When colleges and universities visibly commit to preparing students for informed, engaged civic participation—not as an elective, but as an expected outcome for all—they send a powerful message about their values and contribute to healing the frayed social fabric.

In this time of global uncertainty about the stability of democracy, the CLDE Coalition's leadership is essential. By harnessing the energy and creativity of civic-minded educators, mobilizing its networks and resources, and engaging allies both inside and outside the academy, the coalition can help higher education fulfill its potential as a force for democratic renewal.

The coalition's framework emphasizes essential skills and experiences that are not only vital for engaged citizenship but also increasingly demanded by employers, such as:

- Productive engagement with diverse views and experiences;
- Evidence-based reasoning and problem solving;
- Connecting learning to real-world contexts and challenges; and
- Cultivating ethical judgment and a sense of civic responsibility.

By integrating civic inquiry with students' career preparation, higher education can cultivate leaders who understand the deep connections between the health of the U.S. economy and the health of its democracy.

Of course, this work is challenging. Engaging students in the exploration of complex social and political issues will inevitably surface disagreements and controversies. The goal is not to promote any particular partisan agenda or ideology. Rather, it is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to make their own informed judgments, contribute to the public good, and help create a more just and equitable society.

Majorities of voters across party lines support civic education and believe that students should engage with multiple viewpoints. This data suggests that there is a powerful appetite for civic learning. By embracing this mission, and by ensuring that all students have access to empowering civic learning opportunities, higher education can strengthen American democracy while also rebuilding public trust.[56]

In undertaking this work, higher education must acknowledge that significant inequities persist in students' access to quality civic learning. Too often, the students who could benefit most from these experiences—those from communities that have been historically excluded—are the least likely to have opportunities to participate. Moreover, students who are studying liberal arts, who most likely are at selective four-year institutions, are more likely to have these experiences than students at community colleges.

The CLDE Coalition aims to close this civic equity gap. By bringing together a broad array of higher education stakeholders and civic learning advocates, it can accelerate the spread of evidence-based practices, shine a spotlight on promising models, and build the leadership and momentum needed to make civic learning expected and equitable.

The Connection Between Civic Learning and Higher Education Reform

CCA Pillars of Transformation

Purpose

Aligning the college experience to each student's goals for the future

- First-Year Experience
- Career Exploration
- Academic & Career Alignment
- Adult Learner Engagement

Structure

Building course road maps that make the path to a degree or valued workplace credential clear

- Math Pathways
- Meta Majors
- Academic Maps & Milestones
- Smart Schedules
- Stackable Certificates & Credentials

Momentum

Designing multiple avenues for students to get started, earn credits faster, and stay on track to graduate

- Credit for Competency
- Multiple Measures
- Corequisite Support
- Dual Enrollment
- 15 to Finish/Stay on Track

Support

Addressing student needs and removing barriers to academic success

- Active Academic Support
- Proactive Advising
- 360° Coaching
- Student Basic Needs Support

The CLDE Coalition's work aligns well with CCA's Pillars of Transformation. Colleges can look at the CCA strategies within each pillar through a civic learning lens.

Purpose. CCA has long championed ensuring that every student has a clear academic purpose and pathway from the start of their college experience. The CLDE framework adds a critical civic dimension by encouraging colleges to engage students in projects related to their communities. Through this work, students can have meaningful career exploration, engage in collaborative problem solving, and examine their roles in a democracy and their responsibilities to their communities. These projects also can help anchor and motivate students' academic pursuits. When students see their education as preparation for engaged citizenship as well as career success, they are more likely to persist and thrive.

Structure. Too many students struggle to navigate higher education's complex curricular pathways and bureaucratic mazes. CCA has advocated for highly structured academic programs with clear maps to student success. CLDE's approach is complementary, providing a framework for embedding civic learning and democracy engagement throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum so civic learning is an integral part of every student's experience. Colleges can structure opportunities for students to develop civic knowledge, practice problem solving, and engage across differences as part of their major programs of study—and without having additional pressures related to time or resources.

Momentum. CCA's work has highlighted the importance of academic momentum, emphasizing the power of gateway course completion, credit accumulation, and other high-impact practices in propelling students to on-time graduation. CLDE's focus on experiential civic learning can be a powerful tool for building student momentum. When students have opportunities to apply their learning in real-world settings, work collaboratively on public problems, and connect with community partners, they are more likely to feel a sense of agency, engagement, and motivation that can carry over to their broader academic journey. And by fostering a sense of civic agency, colleges can empower students to become change-makers beyond the campus.

Support. CCA has been a national leader in making the case for robust, holistic student supports that can help every learner succeed. The CLDE framework recognizes that civic learning, like all learning, is most powerful when it is reinforced by a strong infrastructure of support. Creating this infrastructure must include investing in faculty and staff development to foster inclusive pedagogies and facilitation skills, and it must ensure that student affairs professionals and academic advisors are prepared to help students navigate difficult dialogues and connect their civic learning to their broader educational and life journeys. These efforts also must include attending to students' basic needs and mental health so every student is prepared to engage fully in the work of democracy.

Next Steps for Higher Education

There is reason for hope. Across the country, a growing movement of educators, advocates, and leaders are working to reimagine higher education as a force for civic renewal and social transformation. This effort, which is led by the CLDE Coalition, includes a diverse array of organizations and institutions. By working to make civic education a central part of every student's college experience, regardless of their background or field of study, the CLDE Coalition is laying the groundwork for a more engaged and empowered citizenry.

But this work cannot succeed in isolation. To truly transform higher education, all stakeholders must confront—and address—the deep inequities that pervade the field.

Addressing inequities includes:

- Investing in public colleges and universities, which have long been the engines of social mobility and economic opportunity. This investment should recognize that true access to college completion should include attending college exclusively full time.
- Rethinking admissions policies that prioritize privilege over potential.
- Ensuring that every student has access to the support and resources they need to thrive.
- Ensuring that every student's education includes civic learning and democracy engagement so they are prepared to participate in the U.S. economy and democracy.
- Embracing a vision of education that is holistic, experiential, and grounded in today's real-world challenges.

None of this work will be easy. The obstacles are formidable, and resistance will be fierce.

But higher education cannot afford to shy away from this challenge. The stakes are simply too high. At a time when democracy is under assault around the world, and when the very fabric of U.S. society is fraying, the country needs:

- A higher education system that is truly committed to the common good—and one in which all students have an equal ability to earn a credential.
- Institutions that are not just repositories of knowledge but also catalysts for social change.
- Leaders who are willing to put the needs of students and communities ahead of prestige and profit.

CCA calls on educators, policymakers, and citizens to act. The future of U.S. democracy depends, in no small part, on the strength and vitality of its colleges and universities. The road ahead will be long and difficult. But if educators, policymakers, and citizens are willing to embrace a vision of education that is truly inclusive and empowering, then the United States can build a higher education system—and a democracy—that work for everyone.

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