

Complete College, America

Harnessing the Power of Higher Education to Renew American Democracy

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.



¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2024, May). *Annual earnings by educational attainment*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cba/annual-earnings>

² Sternfield, M. (2023, August 31). This is how much singles need to live comfortably in every state. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/poverty/4179830-this-is-how-much-singles-need-to-live-comfortably-in-every-state/>

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.

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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.

The Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (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 the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Campus Compact, College Promise, Complete College America (CCA), and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

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.

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³ Gallup & Lumina Foundation. (2024). *State of higher education 2024 report*. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

⁴ Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2023). *Education pays 2023: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2023.pdf>

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 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.

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.

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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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Visit CompleteCollege.org/CompleteCollegeAmerica-RenewDemocracy to read the full report.



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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