



Policy Brief:

Investing Our Future into Community Colleges, Engines of Economic Mobility

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Who We Are

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- Aisaiah is a sophomore at Bard College. Originally from Chicago, IL. Aisaiah's interest in economic development derives from his experience in his neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago, whose demographics reflect his own background as first-generation, low-income, Black, and Latinx. Aisaiah carries his community in mind through his involvement on his campus as chair of the Student Life Committee and communications leader at his college's only dedicated safe space for BIPOC students. Through this fellowship, Aisaiah hopes to develop his work in public policy and analytics.

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- Gary is a first-year doctoral candidate at Grand Canyon University pursuing a doctorate of education in organizational leadership and development. He has earned a master of professional studies in organizational leadership from Fort Hays State, a bachelor's in communications from The University of Missouri-Kansas City, and an associate's in theater from Kansas City Kansas Community College. He is a nonprofit professional serving in various nonprofits throughout Kansas City in advocacy, education, and social services. Mr. Bradley-Lopez's research areas include professionalism, impression management, self-efficacy, and authentic leadership with a qualitative focus on the Afro-Latinx experience.

Summary

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, college enrollment rates and unemployment rates have risen within Black and Latinx communities. As a response, tuition-free community college for low-income students and adult learners, in tandem with community college infrastructure investment, would work to support workforce development, employment, enrollment, and postsecondary credential attainment.

Need

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new set of barriers for many postsecondary students, with a higher emerging impact for students of color both for entry into higher education and for continuing and completing their degrees. Many higher education institutions that disproportionately serve students from low-income backgrounds, primarily Black and Latinx students, have seen a decline in enrollment since the pandemic. This also includes a sharp drop-off in enrollment from high-poverty high schools compared to pre-pandemic numbers.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has also presented a set of challenges in the workforce.

Before the pandemic, in February 2020, the unemployment rate was 3.5% and unemployed persons numbered at 5.7 million. The unemployment rate declined by 0.3 percentage points to 3.9% in December, and the number of unemployed persons decreased by 483,000 to 6.3 million. Over the year, these measures were down by 2.8% and 4.5 million, respectively. The jobless rate for Latinx people was 4.9% and 7.1% for Black people. More than three million persons reported that they had been unable to work because their employer closed or lost business due to the pandemic. In Kansas the unemployment rate is at 3.6% while Illinois is at 5.7%.² The unemployment rate is also high for people with some college, no degree at 8.3%, a high school diploma at 9%, and less than a high school diploma at 11.7%.³

Community colleges and vocational schools are leading the way to allow millions of students and workers to gain a valuable education and workforce training to meet the demands of these hard economic times. In 2021, 14.8 million applicants applied for federal programs with trends increasing, projecting 15.4 million applicants for the 2022-23 school year. The increase of nearly 700,000 applicants in 2022-23 compared to 2021-22 is due to the many factors that affect applicants' growth such as demographic trends, changes in economic conditions, and labor market demands.⁴ Among students of color, nearly 60% of Black students and almost half of Latinx students rely on the Pell Grant to pay for college. Through the Build Back Better Act the 2022 budget would expand Pell Grant eligibility to potentially 100,000 students who are Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients, commonly known as DREAMers. The Pell Grant went from covering nearly 80% of the cost of a four-year college in 1975⁵ to now less than 30%. As a result, millions of low-income students take out debt to finance their education, including one in three community college students.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has been a factor as many students chose not to pursue postsecondary education, especially as college costs continue to increase. The likelihood of high school students attending a four-year school sank nearly 20% in less than a year—down to 53%, from 71%. One-third of high schoolers said the pandemic's financial impact made it less likely for them to attend four-year institutions, with more opting for community college, trade school, or a certification program.⁷

Equitable access to free community college also includes accessibility for adults' learners. There are more than 67 programs across the United States that are open to adult students and fully cover tuition for the traditional amount of time it takes to earn a certification or degree. Only 22 states, plus Washington, DC, had options that were open to older adults and free tuition. A mere 15 programs were available statewide. Most of the programs, 85%, included at least one public two-year institution option, and 27% of programs included at least one public four-year college option.⁸ However even the programs that are open to older students can include requirements that pose barriers.

Background

According to the U.S. Census, in 2019, among the adult population with at least an associate's degree, there was a disparity between white adults and their Black (19%

difference) and Latinx (27% difference) peers.⁹ In the present context, with Black and Latinx college enrollment and retention decreasing due to the pandemic it is projected, from preliminary data,¹⁰ that these disparities have only increased.

Community colleges enrich the communities that they surround; in areas with a lack of educational outreach/initiatives, for example, they function as an opportunity for Americans from vulnerable backgrounds to pursue postsecondary education;¹¹ especially, those within Black and Latinx communities, who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the Build Back Better Act aims to invest into Pell Grants and the infrastructure of community colleges, their correspondence with funding for equitable tuition-free community college would boost the impact that they serve as low-hanging fruit.¹² For minority students and adult learners, particularly those within Black and Latinx communities, supporting their access to postsecondary credentials will increase their enrollment short-term and result in long-term employability and higher pay.¹³

Ask

- Increase funding to the Build Back Better Act to add \$109 billion to provide two years of free community college, \$85 billion for the Pell Grant program, increasing the maximum grant by \$1,400.
- Fund \$62 billion for the Higher Education Act of 1965 Title IV in grants for programs that improve retention and completion rates at colleges that serve low-income students.

Impact

Encouraging postsecondary education enrollment among vulnerable Latinx and Black students

Preliminary data on the impact of the pandemic reports, in 2020, that 22% of students at private for-profit, less-than-two-year institutions took a leave of absence, while at other types of institutions departures were at 2-10%.¹⁴ Adding \$109 billion to the Build Back Better Act, to support free-tuition college for students that identify as low-income, specifically targeting Black and Latinx students, will help reduce financial challenge. Lowering the price of higher education, by supporting free tuition community college for low-income Black and Latinx students will function in tandem with infrastructure investments to increase college enrollment and retention. These recommendations will serve as restorative action to the impact of the pandemic.

Increasing postsecondary education credential attainment among adult-learners

By supporting tuition-free community college for low-income students and adult learners, it would increase enrollment and the pathway to postsecondary education credentials will be opened for the most vulnerable members of the Black and Latinx community; in awareness of the effects of the pandemic and the impact that it has had on Black and Latinx communities, with unemployment and underemployment affecting our communities at a greater rate.

Promoting professional development and increasing income among Black and Latinx communities

Access to community college opens the opportunity for Black and Latinx students and adult learners to build their credentials. In addition, investment in the infrastructures of community colleges and their programs will increase the variety of its benefits in vocational credentials, educational credentials, and workforce development.

Endnotes

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