



LIFELONG LEARNING

HIGHER EDUCATION

50% of Black, 33% of Latino, and 25% of all borrowers default on their student loans over a 20-year period

3 in 5 students are experiencing basic-needs insecurity because of the pandemic

44% of students at 2-year institutions and 38% at 4-year institutions were concerned about food insecurity in March and April

15% of students at 4-year colleges have experienced homelessness due to COVID-19

Facts adapted from the Lifelong Learning: Higher Education Deep Dive

AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION EXHIBITED MULTIPLE SIGNS OF STRAIN and stress prior to the pandemic. In particular, the sector was confronted with a potent combination of declining financial resources and complex demands, the likes of which it had never seen before. A steady erosion of support over 50 years had left most of public higher education (and some private colleges) struggling to survive in 2020. Drastic cuts have been made to institutional support, especially for the public broad- and open-access institutions educating three-quarters of all students. This has been accompanied by significant reductions in financial aid, including a shift in focus from grants to loans—a privatization of student financing.

The short-term impacts of COVID-19 will be exacerbated as unemployment rates continue to rise, eviction moratoriums end, states' budget shortfalls lead to cuts in institutional appropriations and student financial aid, and the impacts of student debt accumulate. If we fail to take action, we can expect to see a continuation or increase in destructive trends.

KEY ISSUES

- **Unequal rates of college-going**, particularly by race/ethnicity, income, and urbanicity, with numerous educational deserts
- **Increased rates of problematic debt**, financial distress, and housing insecurity
- **Disruption of family formation** among individuals in their 20s and 30s
- **Heightened inequality in high school completion**, combined with low and highly unequal rates of degree completion
- **Widespread anxiety and depression among students** at both the undergraduate and graduate level
- **A workforce characterized by poor working conditions**, particularly at the faculty and staff levels, including economic insecurity and exploitation

PIVOTAL MOVES

A SELECTION OF IDEAS FOR CHANGING COURSE

SUPPORT BASIC NEEDS

Suspend work requirements in all means-tested public benefit programs.

Create a demonstration program to make grants available to colleges and community colleges so they can provide free meals to food-insecure students.

MAKE SURE EVERY STUDENT HAS A HOME

Encourage the use of emergency funds for stabilizing maintenance payments for homeless students.

Remove full-time-student restrictions on Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) units and Section 8 housing vouchers.

Build on the efforts of large public housing authorities by creating targeted housing vouchers for community college students.

EXPAND WORK OPPORTUNITIES

Expand the Federal Work-Study Program and adjust the allocation formula.

Bolster support for student engagement in community service.

FORGIVE STUDENT DEBT

The IRS could use tax records to identify individuals who have not earned an average of more than \$100,000 per year over the last three years (including 2020—approximately the bottom 90% of earners), and automatically cancel all of their federal student loans.

CONNECTIONS

BASIC NEEDS

Many higher-education students were already struggling with basic needs prior to COVID-19, particularly students of color and those in two-year colleges. The pandemic has only worsened those trends, reducing food security an imperiling physical and mental health.

PATH TO RENEWAL

Higher education has provided generations of Americans with access to a better life while increasing the economic vitality of the nation. Millions are in danger of losing those opportunities—or of being able to access them only by incurring crippling debt. To renew the country's economic life, we must restore the vitality of higher education and ensure equitable access for all students.

ADAPTED FROM THE [LIFELONG LEARNING: HIGHER EDUCATION DEEP DIVE](#)

In the last century, American higher education dramatically expanded while keeping three core assumptions intact:

- Means-tested financial aid is the best way to break the link between family income and college attainment.
- Academic potential for college work is most effectively assessed by standardized tests.
- Only those individuals who excelled in high school stand to benefit from college.

A sizable body of empirical research now contradicts each of those assumptions and shows that they serve, independently and together, to exacerbate inequality.

HOPE CENTER FOR COLLEGE, COMMUNITY, AND JUSTICE



In April 2020, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced **Futures for Frontliners**. The program will pay for college for essential workers without a college degree. The effort echoes the Tennessee Reconnect program, launched with bipartisan support in 2019 to provide tuition-free access to community college for adults over the age of 25 without a college degree. The Tennessee Reconnect initiative built on the Tennessee Promise, which has offered tuition-free community college to recent high school graduates since 2015.