

The Misguided Priorities of Our Educational System

We spend too much money on college students and not enough on everyone else.

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Students learning technical and manufacturing skills as part of a high school program in San Antonio. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

Consider two high school seniors — one who exhibits strong academic talent and one who does not. For one, December marks the homestretch of

a yearslong effort, intensively supported by his school, to prepare the perfect college application. For the other, December is just another month on the path to, well, whatever might come after graduation. The former will likely proceed steadily toward a bachelor's degree; the latter is unlikely to finish college if he enrolls at all. To whom does our education system owe what?

That second student, to be clear, has done nothing wrong. He probably clawed his way through his town's standard college-oriented curriculum, though it neither targeted his interests and abilities nor prepared him for work force success. Looking ahead, he faces a labor market in which he may need to work harder than his college-bound counterpart for lower pay, with fewer options and slower advancement. Yet we celebrate the first student and lavish taxpayer funds on his education. To the second student, we offer little beyond a sympathetic "Sorry." Our education system has become one of our nation's most regressive institutions.

After high school graduation, the first student can access more than \$10,000 annually in public funds to support his college experience. Federal funding for higher education has [grown by 133 percent](#) in the past 30 years; combined with [tax breaks](#), [loan subsidies](#) and [state-level funding](#), the annual total exceeds \$150 billion. That funding will cover not only genuine instructional costs, but also state-of-the-art gyms, psychiatric and career counseling services, and whatever social programming the student-life bureaucracy can conceive. At Ohio State, students living off campus get [free fire alarms](#).

The second graduate likely gets nothing. Annual federal funding for a non-college, vocational pathway, at both the high school and postsecondary levels, [totals \\$1 billion](#). Certainly, he will need to buy his own fire alarm.

One explanation for this bizarre state of affairs, in which society invests heavily in those headed for economic success while ignoring those falling behind, is the widespread belief that everyone can be a college graduate. If

that were true, the shove toward the college pipeline might make sense.

But most young Americans do not achieve even a community-college degree. [Federal data](#) show that fewer than [one in five students](#) smoothly navigate the high school to college to career pathway. More students [fail](#) to complete high school on time, more [fail](#) to move on from high school to college, and more [drop out](#) of college. Forty years of reform, accompanied by a [doubling of per pupil spending](#), has failed to improve this picture. Standardized test scores [haven't budged](#). SAT scores have [declined](#). More students enroll in college, but [the share of 25-year-olds with a bachelor's degree](#) did not increase from 1995 to 2015, and it stands barely above the 1975 level.

A second explanation is the widespread belief that a college diploma is a necessary and sufficient “ticket to the middle class.” If that were true, even a small chance at escaping the supposedly sad fate of inadequate education is better than ever admitting defeat.

But while the median college graduate earns more than the median high school graduate, those workers are not the same person — indeed, they are likely people with very different academic prospects. Look instead at the wage distributions for more comparable samples: those with earnings toward the high end for workers with only high school degrees and those at the low end among college graduates. The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics [reports](#) that high school grads with above-average earnings (50th to 90th percentile) earn \$34,000 to \$70,000 annually. College grads with below-average earnings (10th to 50th percentile) earn \$28,000 to \$58,000.

Pushing people from the former category to attend college and land in the latter category does them few favors. And remember, that assumes they graduate; people in their position typically will not. Remember also, those are the outcomes before we attempt to create an attractive non-college pathway that they might prefer and that might equip them for success.

What might such a pathway look like? For the roughly \$100,000 that the public spends to carry many students through high school and college today, we could offer instead two years of traditional high school, a third year that splits time between a sophisticated vocational program and a subsidized internship, two more years split between subsidized work and employer-sponsored training, and a savings account with \$25,000, perhaps for future training. Any American could have, at age 20, three years of work experience, an industry credential and earnings in the bank.

To reverse the system's regressive nature, we should shift our college subsidies toward funding this new pathway. The burden of financing a college education [remains manageable](#) for those who actually graduate and use their degrees. They will still be the economy's winners, even while paying off loans. That some young Americans assume unaffordable debts is not an argument for yet more spending on college, but rather a reminder that its value proposition can prove to be a poor one.

For student borrowers unlikely to graduate, the current subsidies succeed mainly in luring them toward a substantial investment of time and money that is both high-risk and low-return. If a good alternative existed, they would be well served to take it. Certainly, the choice should remain theirs. But to decide wisely whether college is worth the cost, they need to actually face the cost.

People often applaud vocational education in theory, provided it is "for someone else's kids." Those kids are most kids, and a false promise of college success does more harm than good. We owe them our focus and the best pathway that we can construct — one that carries them as close as possible to the destination their college-bound peers will reach, and sometimes beyond.

Oren Cass ([@oren_cass](#)) is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and the author of "[The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America.](#)"

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