



A GUIDE TO COLLEGE - FOR - ALL

January 2022

The American education system reached a notable landmark in 2020: For the first time, half of 25-to-29-year-olds had earned at least an associate's degree. On one hand, that might appear cause for celebration. The figure had marched steadily higher, from 37% in 2005 to 41% in 2010 to 46% in 2015 to now exactly 50%. On the other hand, this record is perhaps best viewed in the negative. Fully half of young adults still do not earn even an associate's degree, and many of those who do earn one achieve it only through an agonizing process of fits and starts, accrue significant debt along the way, and still land in jobs that do not require a degree. Our education system is designed almost exclusively to produce college graduates, and for the most part it fails.

America's decision to place all its eggs in the college attendance basket is perhaps most obvious in the rhetoric of leaders like former President Barack Obama, who once asked a group of students, "How many students here expect to go to college?" and then said to the adults in the room, "I expect all of them to raise their hand." Our funding decisions also make it clear: We send hundreds of billions of dollars annually toward higher education while slowly starving noncollege pathways of support. This was an intentional choice and one that differs dramatically from the model embraced in most developed economies, where noncollege

pathways enjoy equitable support. But it wasn't quite America's decision. More specifically, it was a decision made by a small group of professional educators and policymakers who are themselves a product of the college pipeline, operating in a bubble of successful college graduates, supported by college-educated parents who expect the same for their own children.

By contrast, most Americans reject the college-for-all model. As the American Compass Failing on Purpose Survey shows, parents do not believe that everyone can succeed in college. By almost ten-to-one, they want high schools to "offer students different pathways based on their aptitudes and interests" rather than "set a goal of bringing all students along to the same end point, which is typically preparation for college." Thinking about their own children, most would prefer the offer of a three-year apprenticeship after high school to the offer of free college.

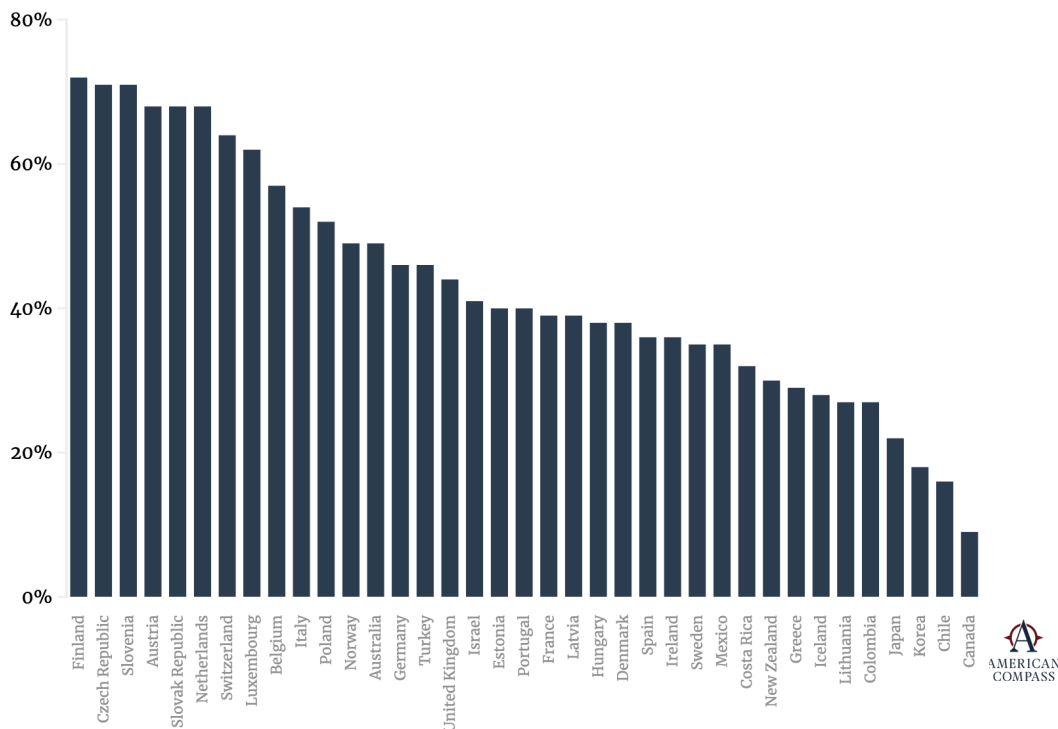
Nowhere else in American life is the allocation of public resources so misaligned with the needs and preferences of the American people. Rebalancing public education to allocate a fair share of resources toward noncollege pathways should be a top priority for any policymaker who wants to help more Americans build good lives for themselves and their families.

ALL-IN ON COLLEGE-FOR-ALL

Americans often take for granted that high schools should focus on academic preparation for college and that college enrollment is the natural next step after high school graduation. This makes us an extraordinary outlier among developed nations. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that most of its member nations have 35–55% of their upper secondary students enrolled in vocational education and training. The only country excluded from the data is the United States, because “in the United States, there is no distinct vocational path at upper secondary level.”

Most developed countries rely on vocational education

Share of upper secondary students enrolled in vocational education and training as a percentage of all upper secondary students (OECD countries)



Source: Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2020, table B7.1

Note: The United States is the only country that the OECD excludes from its statistics on vocational education. It reports, “All countries except the United States have some students enrolled in vocational upper secondary education. In the United States, there is no distinct vocational path at upper secondary level, although optional vocational courses are offered within the general track and VET programmes start at the post-secondary level.”

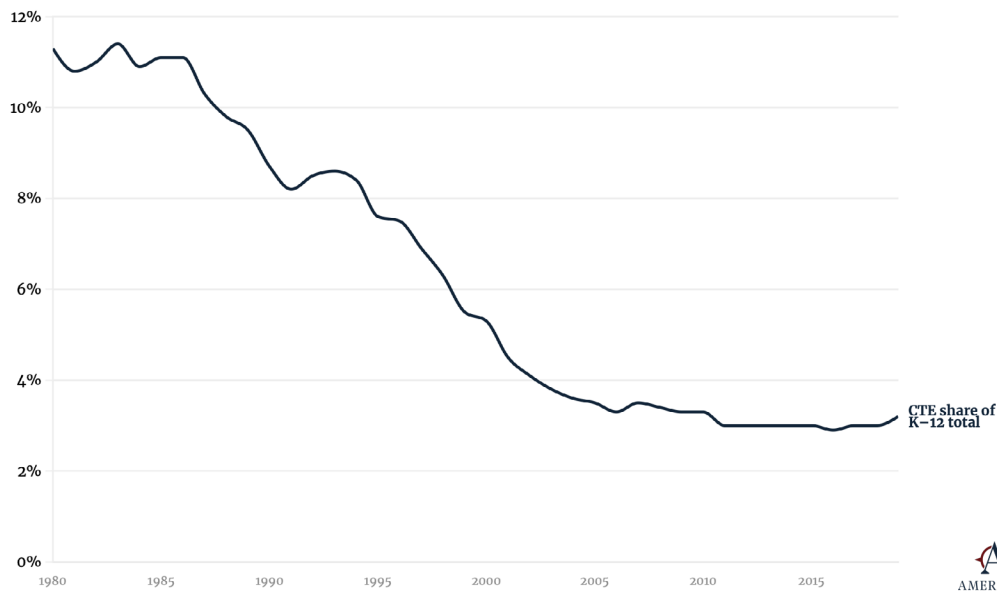
The American attitude, by contrast, is well expressed by former President Barack Obama, who proudly conflated equal opportunity and “making it” with college attendance.

“No matter who you are, what you look like, where you come from, you can make it. That’s an essential promise of America. Where you start should not determine where you end up. And so I’m glad that everybody wants to go to college.” —President Barack Obama, Remarks at College Opportunity Summit, Washington, D.C., December 4, 2014

America once had robust career and technical education, but beginning in the 1960s and 70s it shifted aggressively toward a focus on college enrollment and completion. While spending on education generally has skyrocketed, career and technical education have been deemphasized consistently, causing those options to atrophy.

As spending surged, vocational education was ignored

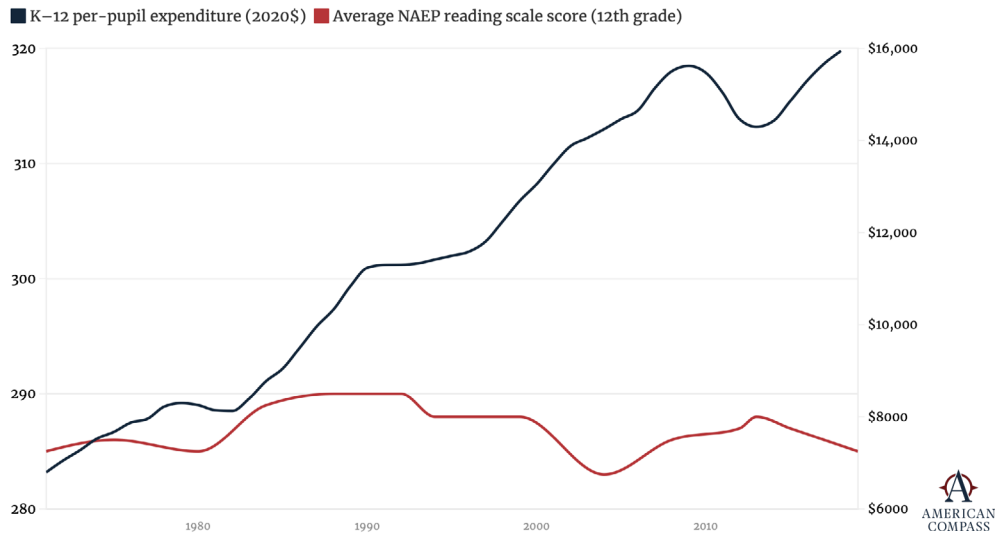
Share of federal K-12 spending on “career and technical education”



Source: U.S. Department of Education, “Budget History Tables”

Dramatic investments in K-12 education were supposed to boost academic achievement, helping prepare all students for college success. This has not happened. To the contrary, while K-12 spending per pupil has doubled in real terms over the past 50 years, reading scores for 12th graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have gone nowhere.

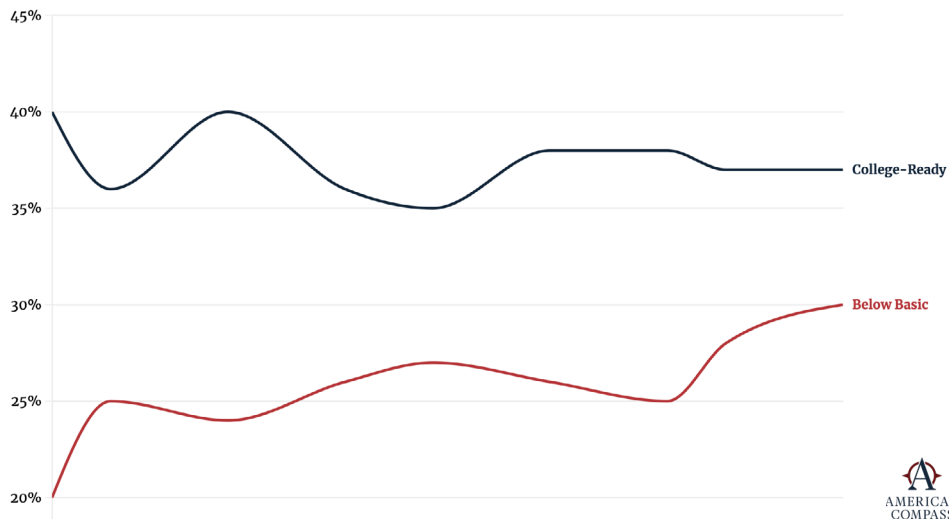
Increased spending did not get results



The threshold for a “Proficient” score on the 12th grade NAEP reading assessment is considered a good proxy for college readiness, but the share of students earning a “Proficient” score has not increased over the past 30 years. Meanwhile, the share failing to earn even a “Basic” score has risen significantly.

No improvement in college readiness

12th grade performance on NAEP reading exam

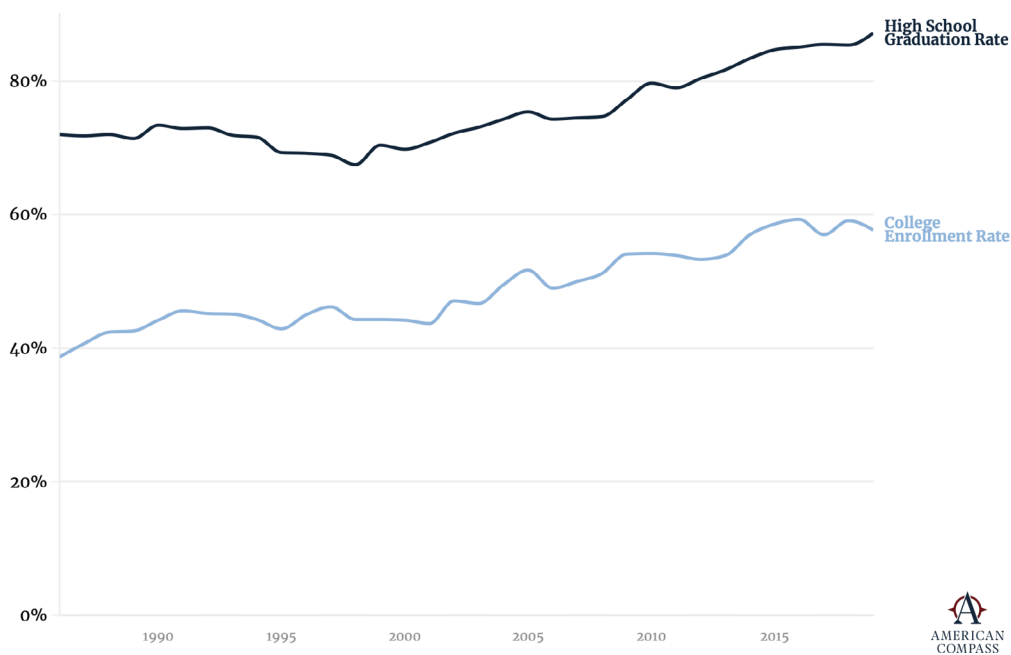


Source: U.S. Department of Education, NAEP Data Explorer; Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr., “College preparedness over the years, according to NAEP,” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, April 8, 2015. Note: The National Assessment Governing Board that oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress has defined the “Proficient” threshold on the NAEP Reading Exam as equivalent to college readiness.

With no sign of improvement in college readiness, and an increasing share of students failing to meet the most basic threshold for achievement, one might expect high-school graduation rates to remain steady or even fall. Instead, high schools have awarded passing grades and diplomas to a steadily increasing share of students, ever more of whom proceed to enroll in college.

Without gains in academic achievement, high school graduation and college enrollment rates keep climbing

Share of 12th graders graduating high school, enrolling in college



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2020, tables 219.10, 302.10.

Note: College enrollment rate calculated as high school graduation rate multiplied by share of high school completers enrolling in college the subsequent fall.

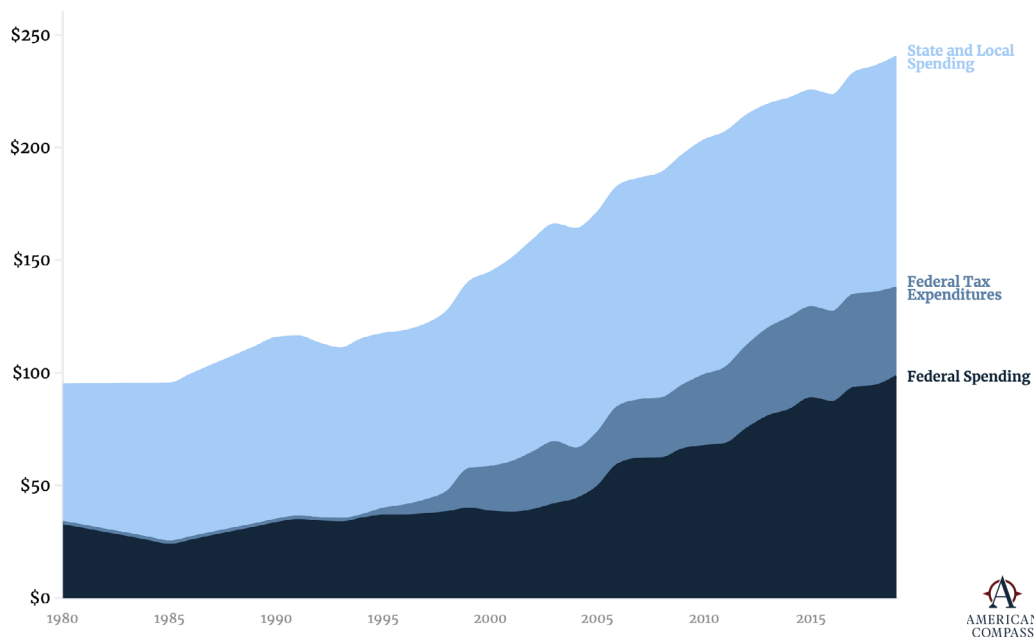


THE FORTUNATE FIFTH

The focus on higher education, and the rising share of students enrolling, has led to an explosion in public funding for colleges and universities. Total public support now exceeds \$200 billion annually.

College-for-all has been a Big-Ed funding bonanza

Annual public funding for higher education (billions of 2020\$)



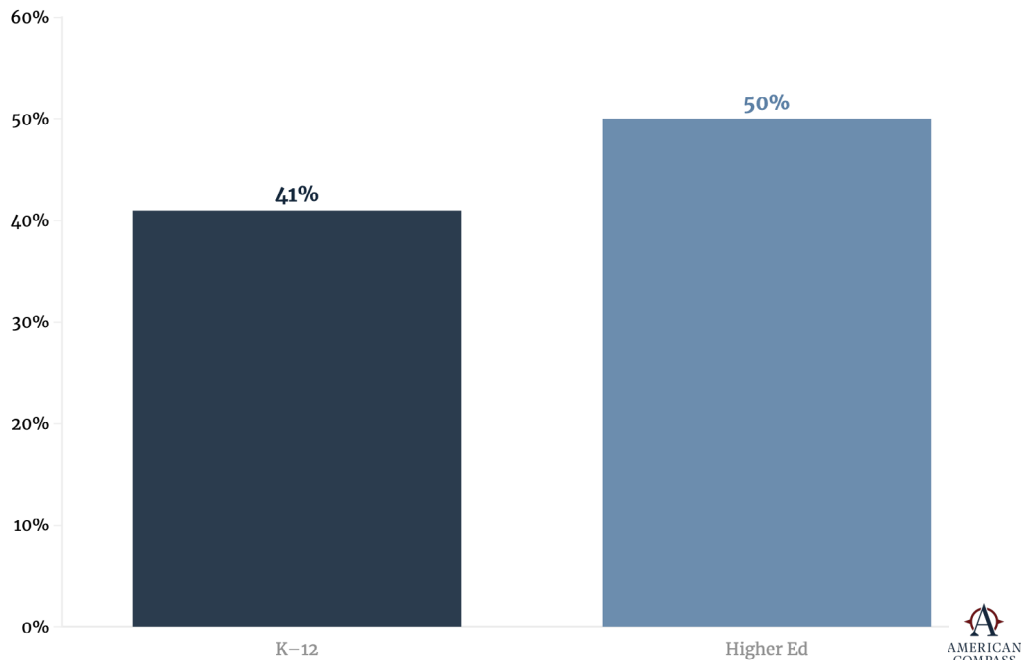
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2020, tables 401.10; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, State Higher Education Finance: FY 2020, Total State and Local Support · Note: Data for 1981-84 and 1986-89 imputed as constant growth or decline between 1980, 1985, and 1990 datapoints. Beginning with 1994, data are five-year trailing averages.



But the increase in public spending on higher education is not just a result of more students attending. Adjusting for total enrollment, public spending per pupil has also exploded in real terms, increasing 50% over the 25 years from 1993 to 2018. That's even faster than per-pupil spending has been increasing in the K-12 system. And that's on top of the massive costs that students and their families bear themselves.

Higher Ed has increased public per-pupil spending as quickly as K-12

Increase in public per-student expenditure, 1993-2018 (2020\$)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2020, tables 236.55, 303.10, 401.10; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, State Higher Education Finance: FY 2020, Total State and Local Support

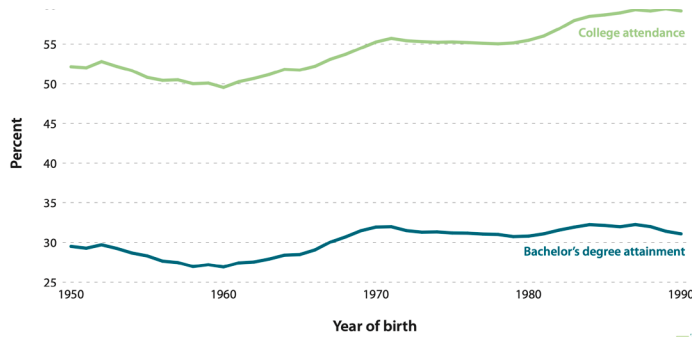
Note: Per-student expenditure for Higher Education includes both full- and part-time students, however the ratio between the two did not vary significantly over the period.

The problem is not that many more students are enrolling in higher education, or that public funds go to supporting those programs. The problem is the failure to produce successful college graduates. Enrollment is rising much faster than completion; the past two generations have seen little change in the share of young Americans achieving a bachelor's degree by age 25.

The surge in college attendance has not produced a surge in completion

College attendance and bachelor's degree attainment rates by age 25, by birth cohort

From David J. Deming, Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project, April 2017



Source: Census Bureau 2000-15.

Note: Figure shows share of each birth cohort that attended at least one year of college and the share that completed at least a bachelor's degree, respectively.

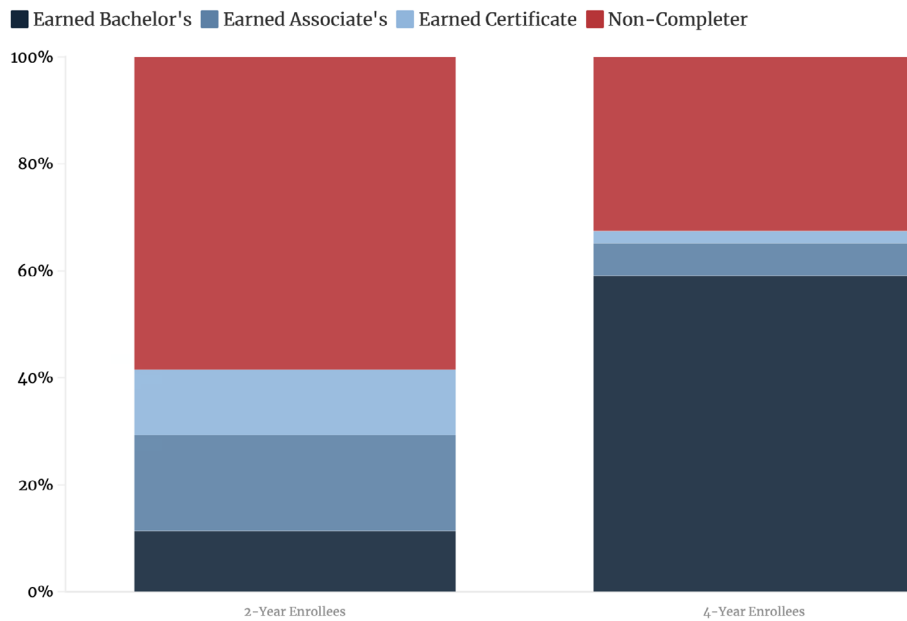
THE HAMILTON PROJECT
BROOKINGS

Source: David J. Deming, "Increasing College Completion with a Federal Higher Education Matching Grant," Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project, April 2017, Figure 1.

Only about half of those who enroll in college will have completed a degree even six years later. The problem is especially acute in two-year programs, typically at community colleges, where only about one-in-four will have earned a degree.

Only about half of college enrollees complete programs

Outcomes for students enrolling in 2011-12 by spring 2017



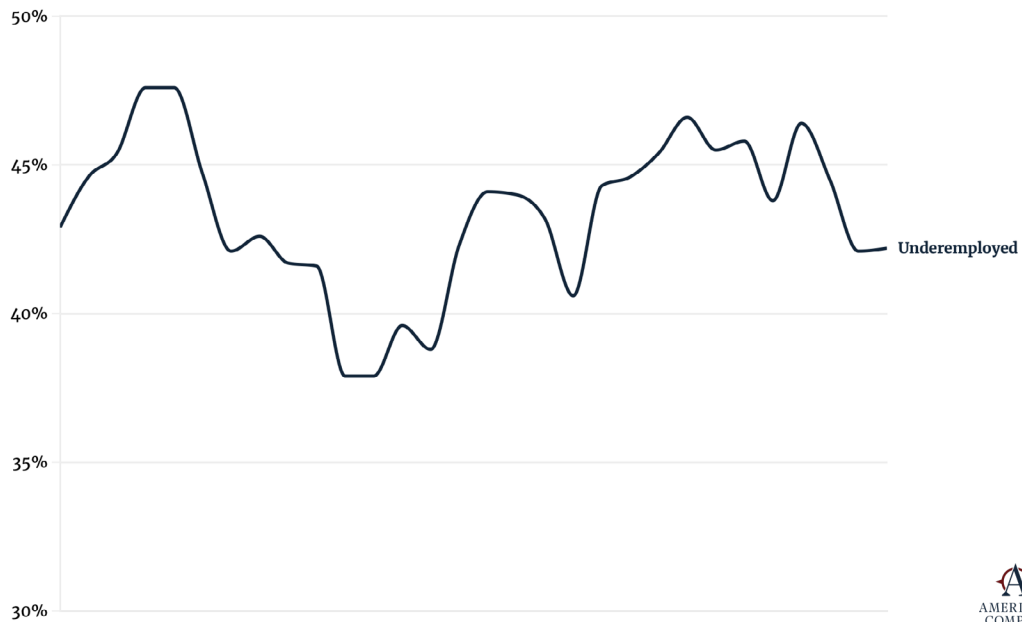
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2020, table 326.4



Many people who do manage to complete college still find that their degree does not offer the value they expected. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, about 40% of recent college graduates are employed in jobs that do not require a degree.

Even among college completers, 40% land in jobs that do not require a degree

Share of recent college graduates classified as “Underemployed”



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, “The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates,” November 2021

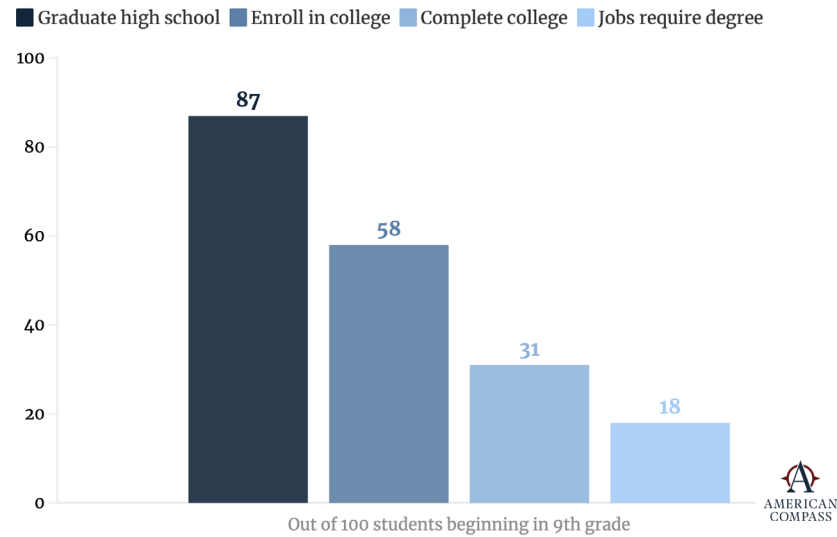


Put it all together, and the college pipeline proves incredibly leaky. Out of 100 high school students, 13 won’t complete high school, another 29 will complete high school but not enroll in college, and 27 will enroll in college but fail to complete a degree. Of the 31 who do earn a college degree, 13 will end up in jobs that don’t require one.

That leaves just 18 of 100 young Americans—call them the Fortunate Fifth—actually moving smoothly from high school to college to career.

Fewer than 1-in-5 go smoothly from high school to college to career

Outcomes per 100 students

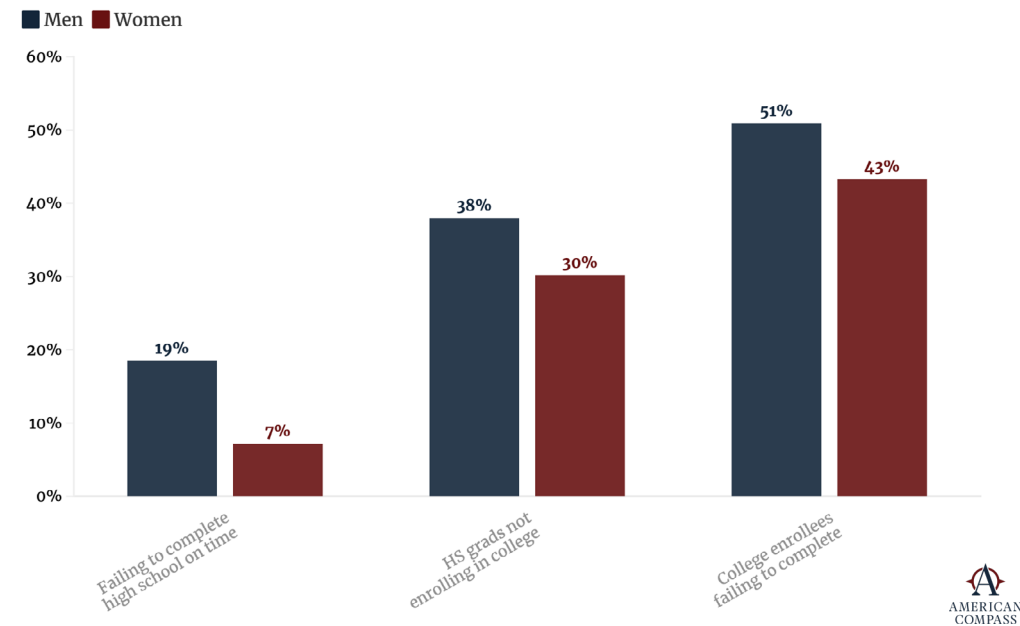


Source: American Compass analysis of data from U.S. Department of Education and Federal Reserve Bank of New York

The college pipeline is especially leaky at every stage for men. Young men are more likely than young women to drop out of high school. Those who do graduate high school are less likely to enroll in college, and those who enroll are less likely to complete.

Young men experience especially bad outcomes

Share of students

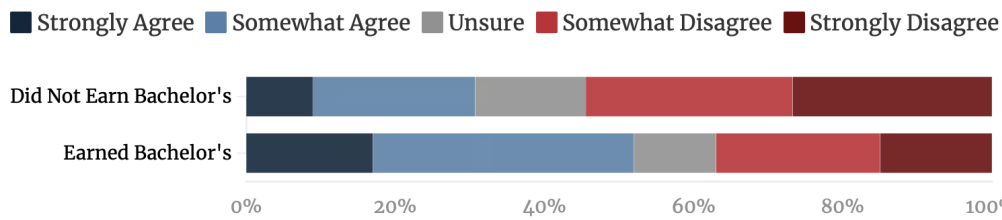


Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2020, tables 219.10, 302.10, 326.4; Federal Reserve Bank of New York, "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates," November 2021 · Note: High school completion rates for men and women calculated based on the overall completion rate and the number of male and female completers.

In a well-functioning education system, young adults who followed different pathways might all see the system as having worked well for them. But in America, while young adults who have earned a bachelor’s degree are likely to say that “the public education system prepares someone like me for success in life” (53% agree / 37% disagree), those without a bachelor’s degree feel the opposite (30% agree / 55% disagree).

Young Americans without bachelor’s degrees say the education system isn’t working

Response to the statement, “The public education system prepares someone like me for success in life.”

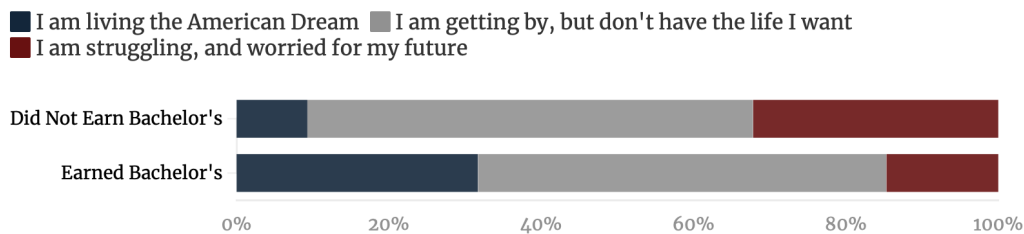


Source: American Compass Failing on Purpose Survey (2021) · N=677
 Note: Includes Americans aged 18-30 not currently enrolled in an educational program.

Likewise, young Americans who have earned bachelor’s degrees are more than three times as likely as their non-degree-holding peers to say they are “living the American Dream.” Those without bachelor’s degrees are much more likely to say they are “struggling and worried for my future.”

Few young Americans without a bachelor’s degree say they are living the American Dream

Response to the question, “Thinking about your life, which of these statements is closest to your feelings?”



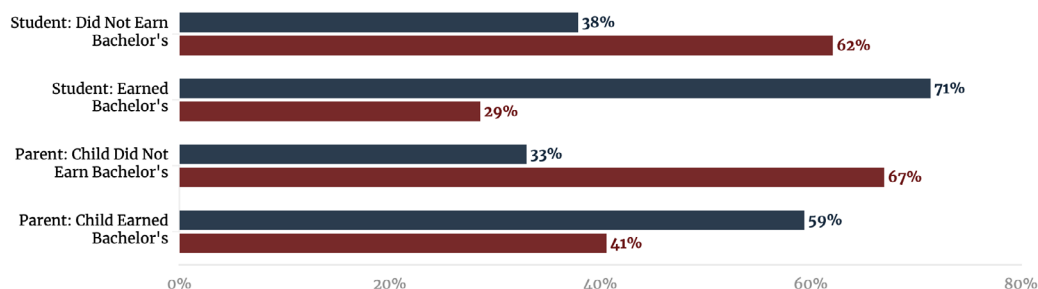
Source: American Compass Failing on Purpose Survey (2021) · N=679
 Note: Includes Americans aged 18-30 not currently enrolled in an educational program.

Progressive policymakers eagerly tout “free college” as a solution, but it is only the young adults who have earned bachelor’s degrees (and their parents) who agree. Among the majority of Americans (and their parents) who do not earn bachelor’s degrees, the idea of a three-year apprenticeship after high school is much more appealing than a free ride at any college to which they are admitted. Even among parents whose children did earn degrees, more than 40% find the three-year apprenticeship appealing.

Most Americans would prefer a 3-year apprenticeship after high school over free college

Response to the question, “If policymakers could have created one of the following options for [you / your child] when [you / they] graduated from or left high school, which do you most wish could have been available?”

■ Full-tuition scholarship to any college or university that [you / your child] was admitted to
 ■ 3-year apprenticeship program after high school that would lead to a valuable credential and a well-paying job



Source: American Compass Failing on Purpose Survey (2021) · N = 529 (students); N = 679 (parents). Note: Includes Americans aged 18-30 not currently enrolled in an educational program and American parents of children aged 12-30 not currently enrolled in an educational program.

CONCLUSION

Education reformers have built a system of, by, and for the college-educated, allocating nearly all resources toward supporting students headed toward college completion and leaving everyone else behind. The Fortunate Fifth who proceed smoothly from high school to college to career are the “winners” in our modern economy, which makes focusing public resources on them deeply regressive. At a minimum, policymakers should allocate resources toward and focus attention on pathways in proportion to the share of students who will be best served by each. This will require reallocating most spending away from colleges and toward noncollege pathways that equip high school students with the skills to transition from high school into productive jobs and good lives in the communities where they live. ■

An electronic version of this article with additional footnotes and sourcing is available at www.americancompass.org.



Our Mission

To restore an economic consensus that emphasizes the importance of family, community, and industry to the nation's liberty and prosperity:

REORIENTING POLITICAL FOCUS from growth for its own sake to widely shared economic development that sustains vital social institutions.

SETTING A COURSE for a country in which families can achieve self-sufficiency, contribute productively to their communities, and prepare the next generation for the same.

HELPING POLICYMAKERS NAVIGATE the limitations that markets and government each face in promoting the general welfare and the nation's security.

Our Activities

AFFILIATION. Providing opportunities for people who share its mission to build relationships, collaborate, and communicate their views to the broader political community.

DELIBERATION. Supporting research and discussion that advances understanding of economic and social conditions and tradeoffs through study of history, analysis of data, elaboration of theory, and development of policy proposals.

ENGAGEMENT. Initiating and facilitating public debate to challenge existing orthodoxy, confront the best arguments of its defenders, and force scrutiny of unexamined assumptions and unconsidered consequences.

Our Principles

American Compass strives to embody the principles and practices of a healthy democratic polity, combining intellectual combat with personal civility.

We welcome converts to our vision and value disagreement amongst our members.

We work toward a version of American politics that remains inevitably partisan and contentious but operates from a common commitment to reinforcing the foundations of a healthy society.

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