



# Imagining the Future of Postsecondary Education

*Delivering on the Promise of Good Careers for All*

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**Nationwide, undergraduate college enrollment remains below prepandemic levels** with 1.28 million fewer students today than in spring 2019.<sup>1</sup>

**Student loan debt in the United States totaled \$1.757 trillion** in April 2023, with 20 percent of adults holding debt and Black college graduates owing an average of \$25,000 more in student loan debt than white college graduates.<sup>2</sup>

Between 2017 and 2019, about 46 percent of “middle-skill” and 37 percent of “high-skill” **occupations no longer asked for a bachelor’s degree**, and instead had job postings listing technical and social skills.<sup>3</sup>

In 2017, **42 percent of associate degree programs** led to **higher median first-year earnings** (\$2,883 a month, or \$34,800 a year) than **bachelor’s degree programs**.<sup>4</sup>

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Postsecondary education is in a unique moment ripe for reinvention. Young people are reexamining the value of a college degree—as enrollment declines, survey data show Americans have less faith in a four-year degree, and concerns about college debt are widespread. Employers are hungry for talent, especially since the “Great Resignation,” when large numbers of workers quit their jobs following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This environment has created new leverage for workers as support for unions and demands for better pay and working conditions have increased and some employers have reexamined degree requirements.

The Urban Institute hosted a two-day workshop on June 1 and 2, 2023, to reimagine the future of postsecondary education so everyone can access a high-quality and affordable education that prepares them for good jobs. Workshop participants included community college students, college presidents and administrators, national research organizations and intermediaries, government staff, and representatives from industry organizations and foundations. Together they worked to generate ideas for imagining a more equitable future through postsecondary education. Below are the questions they considered and the five interrelated ideas that emerged.

## HOW MIGHT WE SUPPORT ALL LEARNERS WHEREVER THEY ARE IN THE EDUCATION JOURNEY?

### Idea: Meet Learners Where They Are in a System of Lifelong Learning Across Generations

The concept of two-generation strategies has been around for some time but has yet to be fully realized. In the future, a more seamless system of lifelong learning beginning from cradle to career will expose people to career options early and provide multiple pathways for skill development. Students will receive the supports they need to thrive, including child care, transportation assistance, and housing. The right supports will be provided because learners will be asked what they need and help shape the ways education is provided. Through expanded online and hybrid learning and supports, students will access education at any time. In their pursuit of education and skill building, it would be easy for students to stop and start their education, change fields, or enhance their skills.

## HOW MIGHT WE CREATE A MORE EFFECTIVE SYSTEM OF CAREER NAVIGATION?

### Idea: Embed Navigators Everywhere

In a system of lifelong learning, navigators will surround learners as they find and progress on their career pathways. These navigators will be available in high schools to help young people explore their interests, and at the local library where any person can walk in to get help. Navigators in colleges and community-based organizations will have the training and resources to guide students toward their first or next jobs. Employers will hire navigators to support worker advancement.

## HOW MIGHT HIGHER EDUCATION AND TECH COLLABORATE TO PREPARE WORKERS?

### Idea: Harness the Best of Postsecondary Education and Technology

In our reimagined postsecondary system, high-touch services are key and are made possible through collaboration with “technology disrupters.” Postsecondary education providers leverage technology to create learning opportunities that meet the needs of learners and employers. Community and technical colleges, training providers, and four-year institutions provide the one-on-one support learners need to progress on their pathway, whether in classrooms, online, or at work sites.

## HOW MIGHT WE ENSURE THAT LEARNERS ARE PREPARED FOR JOBS AND EMPLOYERS CAN FIND TALENT?

### Idea: Build an Infrastructure for Assessing and Communicating Skills and Competencies

In the future, skills will become as valuable as degrees. In this new skills-based ecosystem, learning will be about the skills people master, not how long they spend in a classroom. Learning will happen in high school and college, in training programs, and on the job. In each context there will be ways to document skills and competencies. Students and workers will own their educational records, which will be portable and will help them advance seamlessly in their careers. Information on what skills and credentials are needed for jobs will be transparent to guide learners’ decisionmaking.

## HOW MIGHT WE ENSURE THE BENEFITS OF THIS REIMAGINED SYSTEM ACCRUE EQUITABLY TO ALL LEARNERS?

### Idea: Make Large Federal Investments in Postsecondary Linked to Broader Wealth Building Strategies

The United States will recognize it needs to invest more in the array of policies that can help close racial wealth gaps, especially when linked to postsecondary education investments. One can imagine landmark legislation that brings together multiple federal agencies, including the Departments of Labor, Education, Health, and Housing and Urban Development, to design and support intentional strategies and investments to improve outcomes for Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color. In addition to making postsecondary education more affordable and accessible, targeted efforts will expand homeownership for Black Americans as a strategy for overcoming the racial wealth gap. Experimentation with baby bonds and universal basic incomes will be expanded to further close that gap. In essence, it will be recognized that education alone will not end racial disparities in outcomes, and that significant resources must be invested to ensure prosperity for all.

## ADDITIONAL READING

### *Good Jobs and Careers for All through Postsecondary Education*

Shayne Spaulding, Molly Scott, Nathan Sick, Amanda Briggs, Jincy Wilson, Madeleine Sirois, and Ryan Kelsey [urban.institute/46TP9hO](https://urban.institute/46TP9hO).

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<sup>1</sup> Berg, B., Lee, S., Randolph, B., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D., “Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2023,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, May 2023, [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE\\_Report\\_Spring\\_2023.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Spring_2023.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Hanson, “Average Student Loan Debt,” Education Data Initiative, last updated May 22, 2023, <https://educationdata.org/average-student-loan-debt>.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph B. Fuller and Manjari Raman, *Dismissed by Degrees: How Degree Inflation Is Undermining U.S. Competitiveness and Hurting America’s Middle Class*, Accenture, Grads of Life and Harvard Business School, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale, Ban Cheah, Martin Van Der Werf, and Artem Gulish, *Buyer Beware: First-Year Earnings and Debt for 37,000 College Majors at 4,400 Institutions*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2020.