

**Postsecondary Education Issue Analysis: Low College Completion Rates**

Kelly Coons

Harvard Graduate School of Education

EDU A701: Creating the Future of American Postsecondary Education

Francesca Purcell

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## Section 1

College can be a source of public good. It teaches critical thinking skills, puts people of diverse backgrounds in an environment where they can authentically discuss and learn from each other's experiences in an increasingly-segregated society, and allows for a vast array of interests to be explored. This goodness expands beyond the individual college graduate and impacts society broadly: a more-educated workforce increases the strength of the economy for all (Baum & McPherson, 2022, 5). However, this capacity for good is undercut by the low college completion rates—and the distrust that naturally arises from an expensive, unreliable product, even though the benefits of a Bachelor's degree are well-documented.

The lifetime difference in earnings between a person with a Bachelor's degree and a person with a high school degree is \$570,000 (Greenstone et al., 2016, 16). One does not even need to wait to see the difference: Immediately after graduation, the typical person with a Bachelor's degree makes, on average, \$21,000 more than the average person whose highest educational attainment is a high school degree (American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education, 2016, 47). Obtaining a Bachelor's degree is a route to upwards mobility, even across as wide an income gap as the lowest quintile to the highest quintile:

“...without a college degree a child born into a family in the lowest quintile has a 45 percent chance of remaining in that quintile as an adult and only a 5 percent chance of moving into the highest quintile. On the other hand, children born into the lowest quintile who do earn a college degree have only a 16 percent chance of remaining in the lowest quintile and a 19 percent chance of breaking into the top quintile.” (Greenstone et al., 2016, 14)

These benefits are not solely “fair weather friends.” In hard times, having a Bachelor’s degree is a buffer against job loss. In 2008, during the second-largest economic recession in the United States since the Great Depression, people with a Bachelor’s degree or higher degree were 3.1% less likely to be unemployed than people with a high school degree or equivalent. In 2009, the difference had grown to 5%. (To see a larger-scale comparison on unemployment rates by education status, see Appendix A.) These benefits only apply to those who *complete* a Bachelor’s degree. At the national level, the college completion rate sits at about 60%, which means that 40% of college students drop out (Strauss, 2022). Those students do not only miss out on the personal accomplishment of obtaining a degree—as well as the aforementioned time spent developing critical-thinking skills, making connections across difference, and exploring interests—but, on a practical level, they miss out on the clearest path to repaying the loans they likely took out to pay for college. Jobs that have family-sustaining—and debt-repaying—wages are increasingly inaccessible to those without postsecondary credentials: Two out of three require some kind of postsecondary credential, and half require at least a Bachelor’s degree specifically (Fischer, 2019). The result is that college dropouts are four times more likely to default on student loans than their college graduate counterparts (Strauss, 2022). Defaulting on loans is a drain on credit score, making everything from getting a job to buying a car extremely difficult. A college dropout leaves college, but the financial ramifications may never leave them.

Moreover, the long-lasting drawbacks of dropping out of college are unevenly distributed. The graduation rate varies by institution type. The graduation rate is 63% at public four-year institutions and at 68% at private non-profit four-year institutions but drops precipitously to 29% at private for-profit four-year institutions (NCES). The situation at community colleges, which disproportionately serve low-income and/or people of color, is even more arresting: Only 34% graduate within three years (NCES). The graduation rate even varies

within individual institutions: “The graduation rate for black and Latino students, and students receiving Pell grants [federal grants for low-income students] is 10 to 20 percent lower [in comparison to the overall graduation rate]” (Strauss, 2022). Thus, the students who have the most to gain from a Bachelor’s degree are least likely to obtain one. (To see a more detailed breakout of how socioeconomic status impacts college completion rate, see Appendix B.) Even for the low-income and/or people of color who do graduate, their gains are not the same as their more privileged peers: Complete College America, a non-profit organization focused solely on crafting policies to boost the college completion rate in the United States, highlights, “College completion rates – and ultimately social mobility – for students of color and from low-income households are much lower relative to white and high-income counterparts. For the minoritized students who do graduate, increased time to degree represents higher opportunity costs in lost wages for every semester they need to complete their degree” (*Policy, Equity, and Practice Initiative*). This statement is corroborated by the College Board’s report on earnings by race/ethnicity, gender, and education level. White men with a high school diploma between the ages of 25 and 34 make a median of \$40,700 annually: a median that jumps up by 22,000 to become \$62,700 with a Bachelor’s degree. By contrast, Black women in the same age group make \$26,800 with a high school diploma but make \$42,100 with a Bachelor’s degree, only slightly more than the median of white men with a high school diploma (Ma et al., 2019, 21). People with the same degree should have equal access to the same tier of well-paying jobs, but that is not the reality. In moments of crisis, like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there is simultaneously increased urgency to move to an aforementioned family-sustaining, benefits-eligible job, which increasingly require at least a Bachelor’s degree, and increased tumult, which makes the ability to split energy—and maybe even leave the workforce entirely to further one’s education—even more strained than usual. These students are acutely aware that time spent

learning is not time spent earning. This, too, is corroborated by the College Board's official findings: "The typical 4-year college graduate who enrolls at age 18 and graduates in 4 years can expect to earn enough relative to a high school graduate by age 33 to compensate for being out of the labor force for 4 years and for borrowing the full tuition and fees and books and supplies without any grant aid" (Ma et al., 2019, 4). Even though this population is often eligible for aid, the sticker price and lack of a guarantee of payoff deters many from taking what is often a leap of faith.

To make matters worse, college attendance is moralized. In a chapter made freely available from her book *An Ordinary Age: Finding Your Way in a World That Expects Exceptional*, college dropout Rainesford Stauffer writes,

Too many of the common talking points still exist: If you don't go to college, you're a slacker who didn't make the most of their potential; if you do go, you're also irresponsible, because whatever you decided, there's someone waiting to tell you that you could've done it cheaper, or chosen a better major. A certain idea of how to attend college — pursuing a four-year degree while living at school right after you graduate high school — dominates the narrative, so much so that any other way of attending is labeled "nontraditional" by schools themselves. (Stauffer, 2021)

The result is that, for those who do attend, college is not a time of frolicking freedom but of immense pressure, and students who do not fit the "traditional" mold, being fresh from high school, living on campus with parental financial support and no dependents of their own, are further marginalized by institutional supports that do not fit their needs, from office hours during working hours to assumptions about how "seriously" they are taking their education.

## Section 2

How can institutions fit the needs of all students, both those young, parent-supported “traditional” college students and the wide array of other “nontraditional” learners? All students need to take classes to serve their interests and, ultimately, be on track for graduation, so simplifying course selection and verification is a great place to start.

The previously-mentioned Complete College America (CCA), a non-profit dedicated exclusively to creating policies to boost the college completion rate in the United States, has partnered with the course management software Acadeum to create a course sharing system. Their Course Sharing Consortium uses strategies researched by Complete College America to increase retention: maximizing opportunities for students to take 15 credits a semester in order to stay on track for timely completion, explicitly explaining what is required for completion, and utilizing proactive, rather than crisis-management, advising (*Course Sharing Consortium*). The Course Sharing Consortium enables institutions with empty seats in classes, which would otherwise go to waste, to offer them to other students. The result is that there are more options for each student, including classes at “nontraditional” times, like nights, weekends, shorter terms, and late starts, so that more students, regardless of schedule, can have a “full” semester. Over 440 higher education institutions use Acadeum (Acadeum). One large advantage of Acadeum—a reason why so many use the service—is that its system enables institutions to pre-approve classes. Thus, when students sign up for a course through Acadeum, they know that their institution will accept the credits (Acadeum), which saves time and work for both parties.

Automation alone does not solve the issue of unclear road maps to degree completion and future goals. A human touch can be the difference between dropping out and persisting. Yet the human touch can be in short supply: There are not enough advisors for every student, so it is

those students who know higher education systems best that are most likely to seek them out—just those students who arguably need their help the least, since their friends and family likely have connections by virtue of being college graduates themselves (Carlson, 2020). Even then, academic advising serves to get students into majors, not to ask about their future goals and make a roadmap to achieving them. A student’s experience is made or unmade by their individual advisor; there is no standardization. When a college does standardize its advising procedure, though, the results can be staggering. In 2014, Florida Atlantic University adopted a system of appreciative advising: training their advisors to ask introspective questions to prompt students to self-reflect about what they wanted to do after college and craft an action plan for advisors to help find resources to fulfill. Furthermore, Florida Atlantic University shifted the onus of follow-up from the student to the advisor: Advisors are assigned to students, not vice versa. The result is that the four-year graduation rate has gone up almost 20%, and, in the process, the graduation rate have Black and Hispanic students has become higher than that of the overall population (Carlson, 2020): a stunning reversal of national trends.

Even so, connections play an “outsized role” (Baum & McPherson, 2022, 13) in the job market, and, as important as they are, their importance is unexplained to students. Dr. Ned Laff, an academic advising activist, calls it “the hidden job market” (Carlson, 2020). Qualitative researcher Lee Cuba and his team, in their investigation of liberal arts colleges, explained that the assignment of a faculty advisor is to “jump-start student-faculty interactions,” just like how the roommates exist to “jump-start peer interactions and friendships” (Cuba et al., 2016, 107). Colleges are large systems, often without much communication between departments and schools, so, on the simplest level, a faculty advisor is an in to finding out the answers to questions, even if they cannot answer it by themselves. At liberal arts colleges in particular, where the advisor is a faculty member as opposed to someone hired to do the job of advising,

advisors are deeply familiar with the contours of their field, as opposed to the inexperienced-beyond-the-higher-education-sector advisors employed by other kinds of institutions (Carlson, 2020), providing a touchpoint, shared interests, which can be a pipeline into a deeper, more individuated relationship. However, since at most colleges, students' faculty advisor is assigned to them, they do not always share an interest. This can lead to not only lack of a deeper connection but can prevent a relationship from being formed at all. One subject in Cuba's study, Sara, said of her first-year faculty advisor as a sophomore:

My premajor advisor is kind of useless because he was in a department that I would have never wanted to take a class in, and he really wanted me to take math and science that I never would have wanted to do. So my interaction with him was mostly, this is what I'm doing, give me my code. And it was kind of ridiculous. (Cuba et al., 2016, 126)

This dismissal of faculty interaction does not only apply to the individual advisor, however. The students who did not restart their relationship with their first-year faculty advisor the next year, Cuba's team found, were less likely to meet with *any* faculty outside of class (Cuba et al., 2016, 127). Thus, even small liberal arts colleges, with a more "personal touch," do not wholly solve the problem of advising: the inability to create a standard for a strong interpersonal relationship, which is the "golden ticket" to navigating the ever-changing, often-obtuse realms of college bureaucracy and the job market.

### Section 3

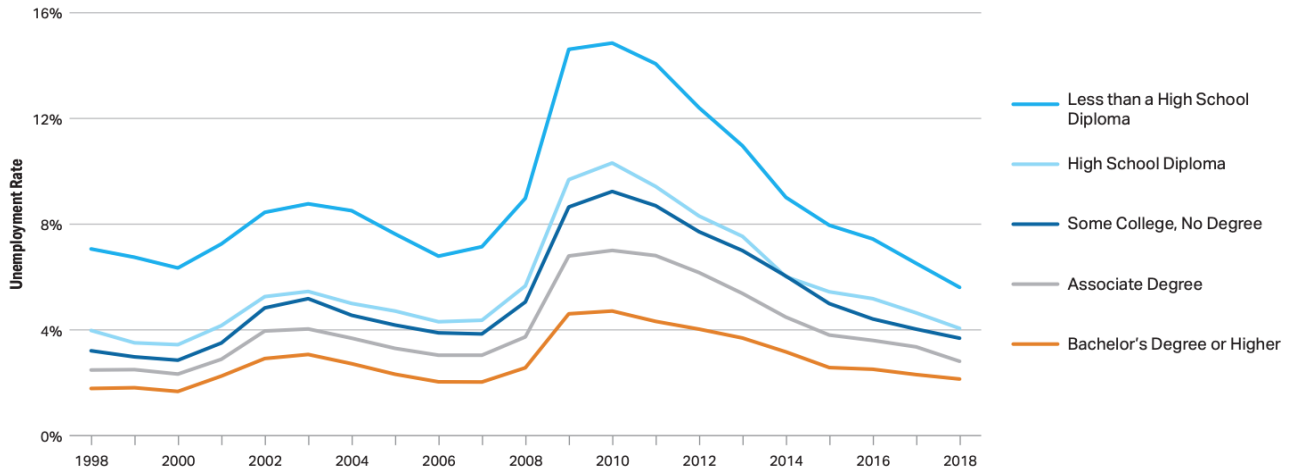
Over the next decade, I predict an increase in college completion rates because that will be a crucial decision-making metric for the shrunken consumer base. The current situation in the college completion landscape is mixed, as there is no sector-wide push to address the issue.



However, demographic factors may force one. Between 2025 and 2029, a 15% drop in the college-going population is predicted (Barshay, 2018). (Although this number will vary by region; see Appendix C.) Financial insecurity, from the 2008 recession, the worst recession since the Great Depression, to the COVID-19, which quickly dethroned it, has prompted a smaller birth rate, which in turn means fewer high school graduates, not all of whom pursue college. Each student, then, is valuable. As students survey the options available to them, the colleges with the highest completion rates will be in the best position to prove their worth, since the benefits of college are only benefits of *completing* college. Institutions that cannot prove that students' investment will pay off will not survive. Thus, even institutions that have strong brands or those that have not felt it important to invest in student support services in the past may find, in this milieu, that things that were previously seen as luxuries by their consumers now take on an identity as a necessity. Institutions will be under a lot of stress, but that stress could translate into less stress for the students. Because there will be a smaller pool of potential students, institutions will be reluctant to increase tuition, since low price is a competitive edge, and, as there will be fewer alums to donate to help keep them afloat, there may be more attempts to maximize current student satisfaction—and, thus, likelihood to donate in the future. In the present day, University of Southern Maine is rebalancing its budget to serve fewer students but have more resources on each one (Barshay, 2018). Only time will tell if that will prove to be an effective strategy to weather the coming storm.

## Appendix A

**FIGURE 2.12A** Unemployment Rates of Individuals Age 25 and Older, by Education Level, 1998 to 2018



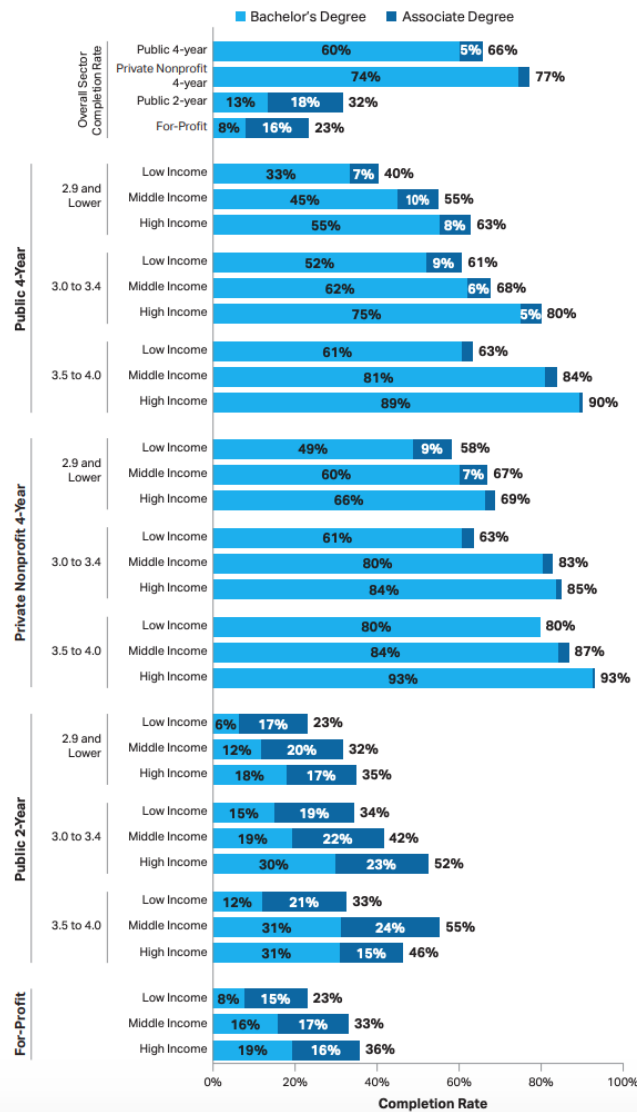
Unemployment Rates of Individuals Age 25 and Older, by Education Level, 1998 to 2018, Selected Years

	Unemployment Rate					BA/HS Unemployment Rate Ratio
	Less than a HS Diploma	High School Diploma	Some College, No Degree	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree or Higher	
1998	7.1%	4.0%	3.2%	2.5%	1.8%	0.45
2003	8.8%	5.5%	5.2%	4.0%	3.1%	0.56
2008	9.0%	5.7%	5.1%	3.7%	2.6%	0.45
2013	11.0%	7.5%	7.0%	5.4%	3.7%	0.49
2018	5.6%	4.1%	3.7%	2.8%	2.1%	0.53

Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2019). *Education pays 2019: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society* (Trends in Higher Education Series). College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2019-full-report.pdf>

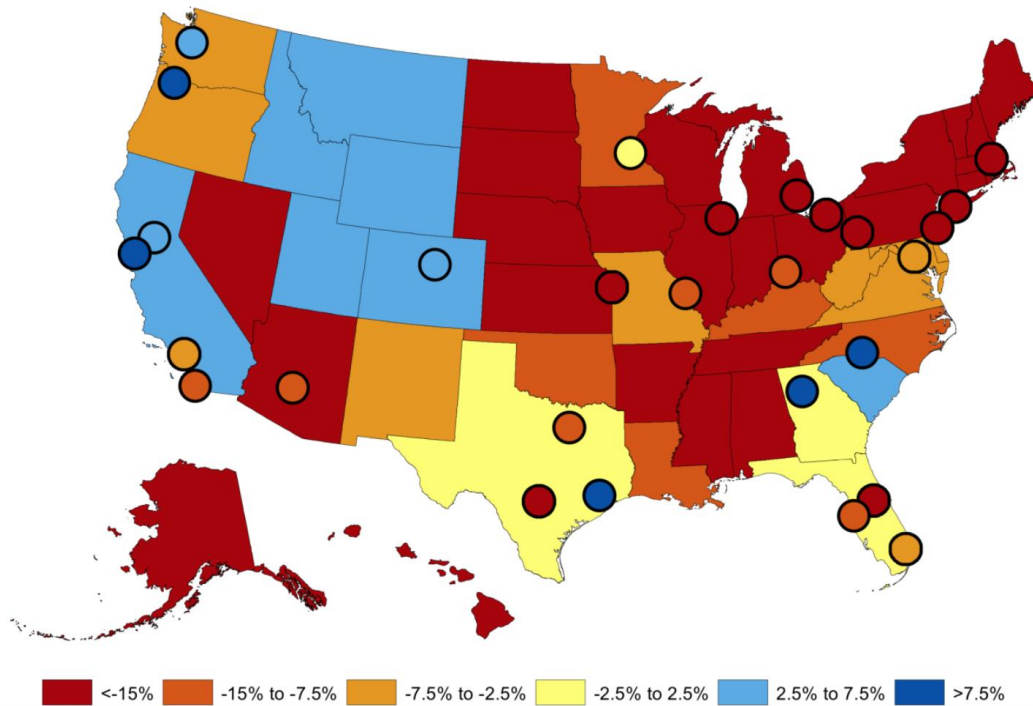
## Appendix B

**FIGURE 1.4** Six-Year Completion Rates by Sector, High School GPA, and Family Income: 2011-12 Beginning Postsecondary Students



Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2019). *Education pays 2019: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society* (Trends in Higher Education Series). College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2019-full-report.pdf>

## Appendix C



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