

Rose Abraham,  
 Fiona Combs,  
 Bryce Johnson-Dendy,  
 Hannah Kline,  
 Haley Lawrence,  
 Anna LeTendre,  
 Akshay Pai,  
 Sam Sellmann,  
 Mike Shaqfeh



## Post Secondary Education

### Creating Opportunities and Ensuring Equity for Students Pursuing Post Secondary [Education in America](#).

Starting around the end of sophomore or junior year in high school, students are bombarded with the thought of: “What do I want to do with my life?” This common question leads to a plethora of follow-up topics relating to the selection of a university. “What should I major in? What college should I attend? Can I afford college? How many clubs do I need on my resumé? Are my grades even good enough? Should I even go to college?” It is an exhausting process, to say the least.

College debt is a huge concern for any student and despite scholarships and numerous financial programs, the “average federal student loan debt balance is \$37,113” (Hanson). Because college is expensive, “30 to 40 percent of all undergraduate students take federal student loans,” which they continue paying off for years following attendance. (“Understanding College Affordability”). Expenses for college begin accruing long before tuition fees though. SATs, SAT prep classes, and application fees are only part of it.

Money is not the only obstacle while applying to college. A college resumé is typically one to two pages, but for many students, the content for it is lacking, not because of any lack of ambition on the student’s part, but because of the lack of access a student has to various extracurricular activities and opportunities. This disparity applies to classes and grades as well. Some students are able to showcase AP and IB classes and the sports, clubs, and programs they participated in on their

applications. For others, however, their activities are limited and their application cannot boast academically rigorous courses. .

In response to these stressors, one might turn away from the prospect of a college degree. But when they do, they are imprinted with a stigma of being less intelligent than peers who attend four years of college (Faller). Although a two-year program or vocational school might better suit an individual, they are still typically pressured by their communities to pursue a four-year college degree (Beauvais). There is the constant devaluing of options like an associate's degree and vocational school and a definite preference towards the bachelor's degree (Faller). As shown by the stigma around college, both parents and schools urge students to continue on to post-secondary education. However, they often don't take the benefits of other programs into consideration. Pressure is placed on kids to go to college through the use of "success stories," personal experience, and in some cases, the underrepresentation of alternative options for further education (Beauvais).

The college admissions process has become an economic game rather than an assessment of a student's ability. To be competitive in the admissions process, money is necessary in both the school's and the student's pockets to take exams for college credit and admissions tests. The ability of students to enter college is highly dependent directly on the educational background and indirectly on the home life of the student (Perry). Students who have the luxury of multiple extracurricular activities and the ability to afford preparatory courses and tests are more likely to obtain entrance into college (Perry). The monetary aspects of college admissions inherently exclude students from low-income backgrounds.

There are many inequalities within the admissions system. Society generally agrees that education is important (Busteed). Therefore, we must ensure equal opportunity for students seeking admissions to post-secondary institutions. The implications of receiving education have long-term effects on adult life such as salary ("Education: The Rising Cost of Not Going to College"). However, various solutions have been proposed to tackle these inequalities. Some competing thoughts include financial freedom and competition.

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## **OPTION ONE: Making Post-Secondary Education Financially Accessible**

The college admissions process is filled with barriers, and these begin as early as high school and end with tuition. Success on tests such as the SAT, ACT, and AP exams often requires funds for preparation materials and courses. Once target scores are reached, the next task is crafting a thorough college application. For this, many higher-income families have the option to reach out to either high school or private college counselors for essay editing and financial aid resources such as the FAFSA and scholarships. Data collected by the US Department of Education finds that only 61 percent of students who did not meet with a counselor during 12th grade to discuss financial aid submitted a FAFSA, compared with 91 percent of students who met with a counselor (Busteed). Given a clear path from high school to college, these students are at a clear advantage when it comes to the admissions process.

Many of these aforementioned personalized options are not financially accessible for middle-class and lower-income students. Research from the Executive Office of the President in 2014 found that high schools serving predominantly low-income and minority students have counselor-to-student ratios twice the national average—1,000 students per counselor versus 470 students per counselor nationally (United States). It is evident that pursuing post-secondary education is an uphill battle for many low-income students due to both a lack of financial and counselor support. Thus, the following two solutions are proposed to help students navigate the college application process. The goal is that they may expand their educational opportunities at a financially manageable cost.

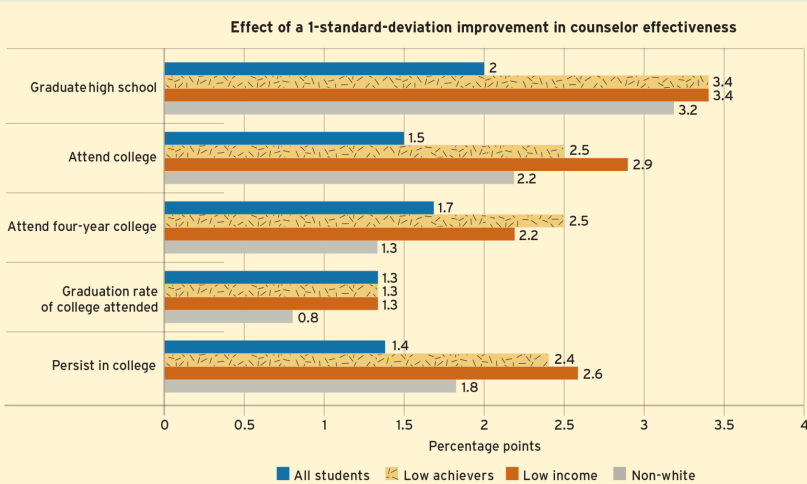
### **How can high school counselors revolutionize the application process?**

The first proposed solution is to increase students' access to counselors. This means guaranteeing that there are more well-trained counselors in public schools to ensure that students have a qualified person to consult about post-secondary plans and application processes. According to an executive report from the Obama Administration, increasing access to school counselors has been shown to increase college-going: Adding one additional high school counselor increases four-year college enrollment by 10 percentage points (United States). High school counselors can provide crucial information for students who may not have the financial means to hire a private college counselor.

In support of this solution, according to the United States Department of Education, “high school seniors who talked one-on-one with a school counselor were: 6.8 times more likely to complete a FAFSA, or Free Application for Federal Student Aid, 3.2 times more likely to attend college, and 2 times more likely to attend a bachelor’s degree program” (Velez). Statistically speaking, the mere

#### More Effective High-School Counselors Boost Their Students’ Success (Figure 2)

Students with more effective high-school counselors are more likely to graduate high school and enroll and persist in college compared to similar classmates assigned to less effective counselors.



NOTE: All effects are statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level or greater. Data are from the Massachusetts Department of Education, 2008-2017.

SOURCE: Author’s analysis

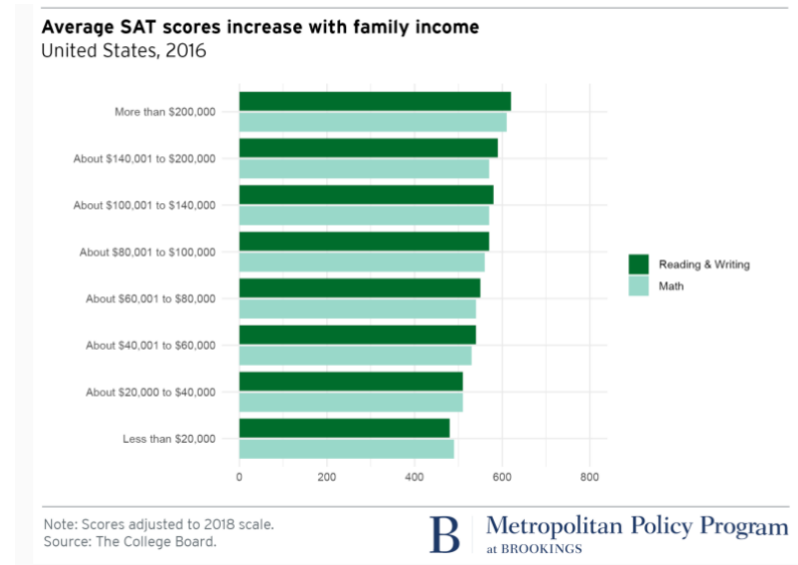
presence of an informed high school counselor in a high school student’s life automatically increases their likelihood of applying for post-secondary education and filling out a FAFSA form. To further enhance this solution, an increase in funding toward guidance counselors is recommended. Increased funding will provide

counselors with extra training in handling situations with students. The combination of better-trained counselors and a lower student-to-counselor ratio would alleviate stress for the student, who may not have access to knowledgeable adults or the ability to hire helpers at home.

### How could universities redistribute their funds to better help their students?

The second proposed solution is to reallocate funds both during the pre-and post- college acceptance process. The college prep process consists of many fees such as college prep courses, SAT prep materials (books, tutors, etc), the college application itself, and more. On average, most college application fees are about \$50 for most four-year non-profit institutions, and it is common for a student to apply to more than one school (“Understanding College Affordability”). In fact, since the Fall of 2013, “more than 80% of first-time, first-year students submitted three or more college applications each year” (Anthony). As such, the application fees can add up, costing a student around \$150 to apply to three schools. For lower-income students, the daunting total of application fees may serve as a barrier from applying

to prestigious schools or to any school at all. This disparity allows wealthier students to apply to more colleges, leaving lower-income students with fewer



opportunities. This solution would provide grants or funds to public schools to aid students in paying for such fees, encouraging them to apply to schools without the constraint of personal wealth. Even though fee waivers exist, it is often difficult for students to receive them because they may not fall under the

qualifications for receiving the waiver. Their household income may be just enough to preclude them from a waiver though it would certainly help them (Anthony). But this issue could be solved with the first solution. The second part of this proposal is to redistribute the application revenue (within a university or college) to be given

back to students in the form of financial aid or scholarships. In 2017, the University of California-Los Angeles made \$5,369,840 from rejected applications alone which went towards tasks such as paying staff and paying transaction fees (Arnold).

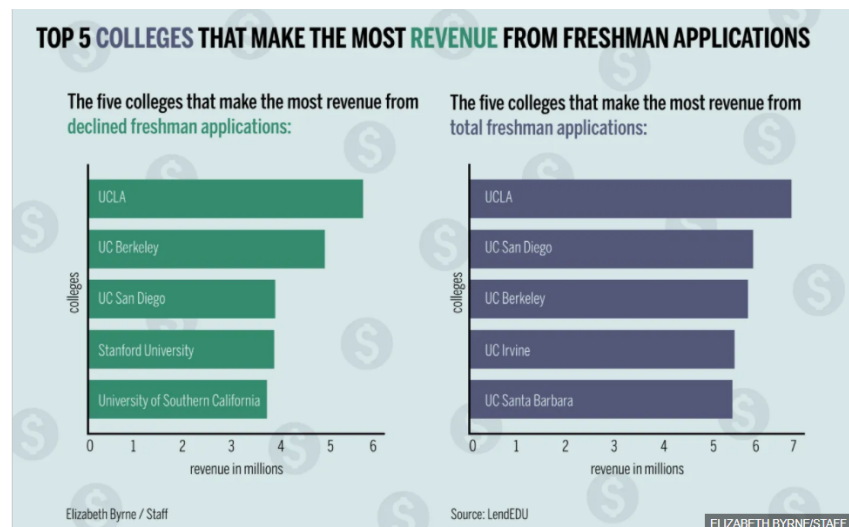


Table 1: Increasing access and funding to high school counselors

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Increase the rate of low-income students applying to colleges	Additional work for school counselors
Encourages lower-income students to pursue more competitive schools	More work for students to manage in addition to possibly already busy schedules
Greater chance of getting financial aid	

Table 2: Reallocating funds during the pre- and post-acceptance

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Encourages low-income students to apply to as many colleges without worrying about application fees	The pay of those who review college applications could be jeopardized (Barber)
Receive more equivalent prep to that of higher-income students	Any attempt to give money back to students would mean the college is losing money
Could possibly get additional scholarships from university	Funds would increase taxes or divert money away from something else

## OPTION TWO: Widespread Implementation of School Choice

Amongst other things, grades and SAT scores are primary influences on a student's college admission. The affluence of the surrounding community, teaching standards, and access to academic programs all affect a high school student's ability to get good SAT scores and grades (Perry). College admissions officers are aware of the various academic backgrounds of students, and rather than use a student's high school as a deciding factor, they use it as a frame or background to make decisions. For example, even if a student has a low SAT score or few academic clubs or program experiences, the admissions officer will consider the availability of these things (Pierce). However, despite the efforts to commit to fairness, elite colleges “enroll more students from the top 1 percent of the income scale than the entire bottom 60 percent” (Thompson).

Different states have different approaches to the general lack of equity. For example, in 1997, Texas passed the Texas Top Ten Percent Law, which guaranteed automatic admission into all state-funded universities for the Texas students in the top ten percent of their high school's graduating class (Brand). While this law makes admissions easier for students if they wish to go to state-funded universities, their enrollment remains dependent on other requirements, including ACT scores.

Some U.S. states have chosen some form of school choice to help combat unfairness. School choice is the allowance of “public education funds to follow students to the schools or services that best fit their needs —whether that's to a public school, private school, charter school, home school or any other learning environment families choose” (“School Choice in America”). Rather than focusing on the admission officer's point of view and adjusting criteria for getting into college, school choice centers around helping students reach the existing criteria by having access to better schools, better programs, and better preparation for SATs.

### **What is School Choice?**

School choice encompasses a variety of programs. It includes school vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), tax-credit scholarships, tax credits, tax deductions, and opportunity scholarship programs for private schools. It also includes all types of schools: charter, magnet, public, private, online, and homeschooling (“What is School Choice?”).

All of the scholarships use a portion of the tax money that would've gone to the local school and give it to the school a parent enrolls their child in. Education savings accounts are similar but the money goes into a savings account instead and



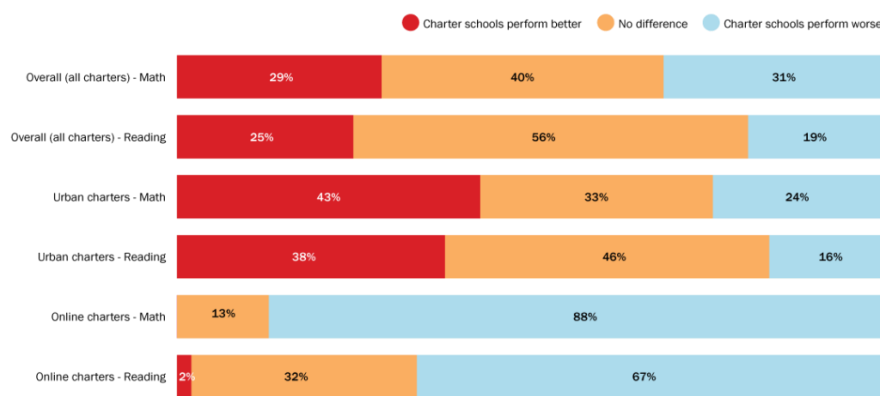
can be later used for tuition, online education, tutoring, or college courses. Tax credit scholarships allow corporations who donate to school choice scholarships to receive tax credits for their contribution, and individuals who donate may also receive tax credits (“School Choice in America”).

## What are the Implications of School Choice?

School choice leaves the decision of which school a child should attend entirely to the family, rather than being solely based on geographical location. Parents have cited a variety of reasons why they appreciate school choice, including the ability to: choose a safer environment where their child is more likely to fit in and be comfortable, choose a school aligned with the values they want to be instilled in their children, choose a higher-quality education, and switch from schools they deem inadequate (DiPerna). Additionally, school choice redirects some of the money paid through taxes to the chosen school, regardless of the type of school. This can be done through vouchers, scholarships, and ESAs.

Although a 2019 survey by Democrats For Educational Reform found 81% of voters from across the political spectrum support some form of school choice, it is not without its drawbacks (“National Education Polling Results”). Opponents to school choice argue that school choice pits different schools against each other, funnels money away from standard public schools, and primarily helps the wealthy (Hallman). On the other hand, with the option of school choice, schools would be

**Charter School Performance Compared to Matched Traditional Public Schools**  
(CREDO Studies)



Source: Data on all charters from CREDO's 2013 National School Study. Data on urban charters from CREDO's 2015 Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions. Data on online charters from CREDO's 2015 Online Charter School Study.

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inclined to outperform their opponents to take the greatest number of students possible, therefore they would all be striving to give students the best quality education (Valant). Yet, with voucher programs and money still being paid through taxes to public schools, school choice leaves public school districts with less money to improve themselves and neglects those students who cannot leave that specific district (Hallman). Moving out of a public district to

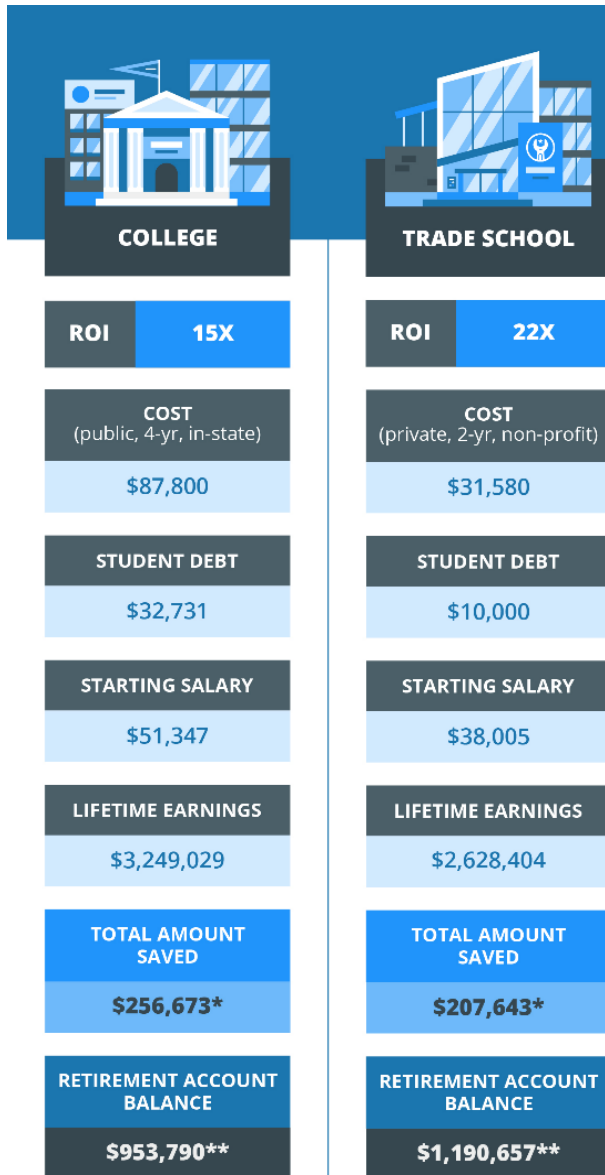
another school is especially difficult for students with disabilities as only public schools are legally required to provide the necessary modifications for these students. School choice is also more difficult for financially struggling families because they cannot always get a voucher for tuition and there could be other added costs such as transportation (Hallman). Therefore, while in theory, school choice makes private schools more accessible to everyone, that is not always the case in implementation and may leave lower-income families behind in inadequate public schools while higher-income families are able to transfer to the schools of their choice.

**Table 3: School choice**

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Parents have a greater say in child’s education	Public schools get less funding
Children able to attend “better” school and schools where they are more likely to fit in	Disabled students are potentially disadvantaged as private schools aren’t required to have accommodations like public schools
Private education becomes more affordable	Tax money may go to religious schools
Creates competition among schools	Teachers not required to have as much education in private schools
Private schools are more accountable to parents	Transportation costs not covered
Increased graduation rates in private schools	Test scores don’t necessarily improve

## OPTION THREE: Prioritize Alternatives To College

There is a social ideology that is ingrained in students that obtaining a bachelor's degree is the only way to arrive at stable employment and sustainable lifetime earnings. The median salary for a student with a bachelor's degree is \$64,896, while it is \$38,792 for college graduates, according to Northeastern University (Stobierski). In addition, the average weekly salary of adults in the United States whose highest credential is a high school diploma is \$712 while those with a bachelor's degree earn \$1,173, and those with "some college but no degree"



\*Assumes national average personal savings rate  
 \*\*Assumes an average yearly return of 10% on savings

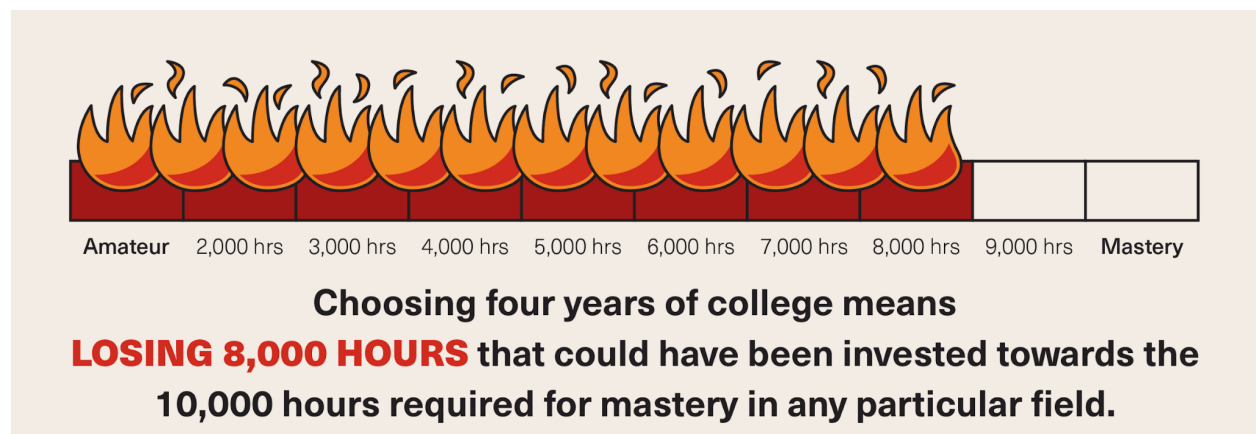
earn \$774 per week (Busteed). Based on these numbers, it appears that college graduates make more than those without a college degree. However, it is important to note that salary is a spectrum. There will be overlap with pay, where some trade school attendees will earn more than a college-educated counterpart. The critical factor to validating the long-term salary differences is the position that the person is in. Another prominent financial piece of information is that those who attend a 4-year university are likely to take out loans for their education (Page). In this case, the interest must be paid back, which could potentially lower their rate of return on the investment in the degree.

Nevertheless, for high school students, it is likely that they are pressured into attending college and earning a bachelor's degree, instead of being encouraged to seek alternatives.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 62.7% of 2020 high school graduates were enrolled in college. A

bachelor's degree is typically viewed as a promising route to middle-class employment. Obtaining a bachelor's degree is considered a natural stepping stone in a high schooler's career in most suburban areas. However, this is not the case in rural areas, where trade school or moving directly into the workforce is favored. The United States Government reports that the proportion of rural adults 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 5 percent to 35 percent from 1960 to 2019 ("Rural Education"). There is still a large proportion of students from rural backgrounds that lack a college degree and instead decide to pursue vocational education or find a job immediately after high school.

The job market of the 21st century consists of jobs that require specialized training in technology that bachelor's programs are too broad to address. This is beneficial for those attending vocational-technical schools since these students will have a unique background in a specific field that makes them a better fit for a job. There has been an increase in attention towards trade school, with trade school enrollment increasing from "9.6 million students in 1999 to 16 million in 2016" (San Francisco City Department of Human Resources). However, there is still a stigma surrounding trade school as being a last-resort option for those who were having problems in 'real school' (ETI School of Skilled Trades). These beliefs pressure students into avoiding trade school instead of seeking a bachelor's degree. A bachelor's degree requires a four-year time commitment, whereas trade school students can earn a certificate in a field in about one or two years.



The stark difference in funding for vocational and trade programs also shows how four-year degree programs and credentialism are viewed as the "best" option in our society. From 2014 to 2015, "the United States spent \$162 billion supporting degree-based college education while the Department of Education spent a mere

\$1.1 billion on career and technical education” (Busteed). If there is more awareness and enrollment in vocational schools, funding may increase, which could improve these programs and make them more socially credible.

While some students may adhere to this social stigma strengthening it, this approach prioritizes a holistic review of alternative options to the four-year degree. More specifically, the solution focuses on creating and improving awareness for alternative options that focus on educating people. It explores the advantages and disadvantages of alternatives to a four-year bachelor's degree. An increase in recognition and the value of alternative options are necessary. This change relies on social factors to widen the viewpoints of all people and counteract the stigma of needing to obtain a four-year degree. The alternatives to the four-year degree are broken down into two categories: community colleges and vocational education.

Collectively, these opportunities have similarities between their advantages and disadvantages. Attending a community college and obtaining an associate's degree requires less of a time commitment, whereas an apprenticeship or vocational education focuses on providing students 'with real-world' experience.

**Table 4: Attending community college or acquiring an associate's degree**

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Can earn credits to transfer	Negative social stigma that students receive an inadequate education
Flexible Schedules	Income disparity between college graduates and their age counterparts
Allow for adjustment to college living	Little to no campus life or options for extracurricular involvement
Low short-term investment	Limited degree options
Accessible to low-income families	Limited independence and social growth due
Accessible for adult learners	Lower quality facilities
Middle-ground for those who are undecided	Lack of prestige and viewed as “second rate”

Table 5: Apprenticeships and vocational technology education

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Alternative Route to a job position	Lower long-term pay and maintains social inequality
Short-term income benefits	Possibility that profession will become obsolete
Ease of transition to workforce	Difficult to change career paths
Lots of experience and skill sets	Highly specialized in apprenticeships
No debt to be paid back, earn while you learn	Larger responsibilities than educated counterparts
Access to higher apprenticeships and micro-credentials	Professional growth could be limited
Equally broad array of choices as a college degree	Rushed to adulthood and lack of social transition period

## Summary of Proposed Options

### Approach 1: Increasing Financial Accessibility

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Increase the rate of low-income students applying to colleges.	Additional work for school counselors.
Greater chance of getting financial aid	Additional work for students to manage in an already filled schedule
No limit on the number of applications for low-income students	The pay of those who review the college applications would be jeopardized.
Students receive equal preparation	College loses money by supporting students and providing assistance

### Approach 2: Enacting School Choice

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Parents have a larger say in child's education	Public schools get less funding
Children are able to attend "better" school.	Fewer accommodations for disabled students in private schools
Private education is more affordable	Tax money may go to religious schools
Private schools more accountable to parents	Teachers not required to have as much education in private schools
Creates competition among schools	Transportation costs not covered
Increased graduation rates in private school	Test scores don't necessarily improve

### Approach 3: Pursuing Alternatives to College

<b>PROS</b>	<b>CONS</b>
Low short-term investment	Negative social stigma
Accessible to a wider variety of students	Long-term income disparity
Alternative route to job position	Lack of social “transition” period
Gain a valuable skill set in a shorter period of time	Harder to change career path
Hands-on work experience	Limited professional growth



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