

Why the “for all” in “free college for all” matters

The advantages of a universal program

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It's presidential primary season, and one topic many Democratic candidates are talking about is free tuition at public colleges. It's a timely idea. Decades ago when college was cheaper, it was also optional: a high-school education was enough for a stable, middle-class career. Not anymore. Today, college is what high school was—a prerequisite for a baseline prosperity—even as skyrocketing tuition has priced many families out.

Public universities are controlled mostly by states and community colleges by counties. Yet presidential candidates seek to cast a national vision—and to draw

distinctions among themselves. Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and Julián Castro support sweeping programs of free college for all. Others criticize the scope of such proposals, offering narrower reforms to make college free or at least debt-free for lower-income Americans.

The disagreement reflects a broader divide between two approaches to social spending: universal versus “means tested.” The two represent different visions of what progressive social policy should be.

Means-tested programs direct aid to the people who need it most. Examples include Medicaid, food stamps, and housing vouchers. In a universal program, everyone is eligible—regardless of means. Examples include Medicare, Social Security, and K-12 education. Means-tested programs have a clear sense to them. They take seriously both fiscal restraint and the particular needs of the poor. Universal programs, however, have proven more effective in the long run.

That’s because programs aimed at low-income people are politically fragile; they depend on friendly legislators both retaining power and staying friendly. They are perennially vulnerable to benefit cuts and eligibility restrictions. Universal programs, however, are available to everyone—and it’s politically foolhardy to mess with benefits enjoyed by voters across classes. So those benefits become a durable part of American life.

This durability is crucial in an area like higher education. When lower-income families make college plans, it’s a long-term project involving budgets and sacrifices. They need a program to reliably deliver—not to move the bar every time there’s a change of power in Washington.

What’s more, full-time education is an immersive experience. A universal program would enable public colleges to be what public K-12 schools are at their best: a site for broad solidarity, where diverse people form community and pursue common goals. Elite private colleges would no doubt continue to attract the very rich, just as some private K-12 schools do now. Still, a good public school makes even relatively affluent families think twice before saying no to free tuition. Imagine if public colleges had that same draw.

Free college efforts are already under way at the state and local levels. Taking them national and universal will require political will—and significant funding. Warren and Sanders propose new taxes on the very wealthy; the Institute for Policy Studies has

identified \$350 billion a year in military spending cuts. Reversing the harmful and regressive 2017 tax cuts would go a long way as well. Like all public spending, it's a question of priorities. In an era when mostly only the college-educated have decent financial prospects, it's time to prioritize universal free tuition.

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