

Free College is Both Possible and Necessary

Written by Mike McCabe, Blue Jean Nation

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One very important thing missing from the state budget debate, says Mike McCabe, founder of Blue Jean Nation.

ALTOONA, WI - When it comes to the future of higher education in Wisconsin, state lawmakers are stuck in a rut, thinking only about whether spending in this area should be cut a little or a lot and whether student tuition should be kept where it is (which is astronomically high) or be allowed to continue to spiral upward.

We should be talking about free college instead. The viability of the American Dream in the 21st Century depends on it.

Generations ago, Wisconsin was among the trailblazing states that built systems of universal, free public education all the way through high school. Few of the people who were paying for this creation had high school diplomas. Many were illiterate. Most were farmers, but they could see industrialization coming. They knew their children and grandchildren might not work the land as they did. They knew that chances were their kids and grandkids would be working in factories or offices. They knew future generations would need more education and different skills than they had in order to have a shot at the American Dream.

Today, we have to ask ourselves a question our lawmakers are not asking as they debate the future of education. Does a high school diploma alone provide a sure pathway to the American Dream? The answer is obvious. The answer is no. Education and training beyond high school has become a necessity.

So our challenge is simple. We have to do for future generations what past generations did for us. They were substantially poorer than we are, but they built – and paid for – a way for the American Dream to be attainable for us. We need to do the same for our kids and grandkids.

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The [Wisconsin HOPE Lab](#) already has developed a [detailed plan](#) for a free college option. The state of Oregon is actively [pursuing](#) it.

Creating a pathway to the American Dream is one of Blue Jean Nation's [five aims](#) . Turning this aspiration into reality requires us to commit to extending the promise of free public education for everyone all the way through college.

How to do it, how soon it can be done, and how this critical investment will be made is what our elected representatives should be debating.