

Higher Education

Strengthening Higher Education

Simplify Student Aid & Emphasize Science, Math, and Critical Languages

Background

The importance of higher education to the future of the nation cannot be exaggerated. Economic growth and responsible political participation increasingly depend on a well-read and scientifically literate citizenry. Social mobility and higher incomes are closely tied to the acquisition of a college diploma, and to the communications skills and critical thinking that higher education fosters. For many, a liberal education, which introduces students to the many dimensions of their own civilization and to the diversity of human civilizations, enlarges sensibility and understanding.

American universities are strong in many ways. No nation on earth can boast universities of greater overall quality or diversity. Millions of American students compete for admission. In fact, undergraduate and graduate students from around the world eagerly seek enrollment.

Yet, today, higher education in America faces formidable problems: unaffordable tuition, lack of accountability, students ill-prepared for college, declining enrollment in math and science, and too few graduates fluent in critical foreign languages.

Recommendations

The next President will inevitably face challenges with respect to improving Americans' social mobility and economic prosperity, enhancing the nation's competitiveness in the global marketplace, cultivating informed and engaged democratic participation, and bolstering national security. Strengthening higher education is essential to all of these and, therefore, the next President should:

- make college education more attainable for low-income students by simplifying the grants process and reducing inefficiency in the distribution of financial aid
- encourage universities that receive federal dollars to fashion responsible ways to measure student progress and track college costs



- create federally funded fellowships in biology, chemistry, and physics that require recipients, after graduation, to teach high school for one to four years
- create a signature program of federally funded fellowships not only to support students who study critical foreign languages, but also to build much-needed capacity within the Departments of State, Education, and Defense

Key Facts

- the United States has fallen to 12th place among major industrialized countries in overall higher educational attainment and 16th in high school graduation
- in the United States, science and math education is on the decline, with American students ranking 24th out of 29 developed nations in math
- average 2006-2007 tuition costs are \$5,836 to attend a state school and \$22,218 to attend a private college
- at elite private universities, the yearly price tag can approach \$50,000.
- the average student borrower graduates from college with \$17,500 in student loan debt

A full version of this paper, as well as supporting background material, is available at www.opportunity08.org

About the Author and the Project

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Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and an associate professor of law at George Mason University Law School. His research focuses on the interplay of law, ethics, and politics in modern society. His current research is concerned with the material and moral preconditions of liberal democracy in America and abroad.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.