



No Support, No Access: Confronting College Inequity in Public Schools

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Low-income and first-generation students face systemic barriers to college access, particularly in underfunded public schools. While resources like FAFSA and scholarships exist, many students receive little to no support navigating the process. This policy brief proposes district-level solutions, including full-time college counselors, in-school college preparation, and multilingual, culturally responsive advising, with a pathway to scale at the state and federal levels. By investing in equity-based support, we can begin closing the opportunity gap and ensure that all students are equipped to pursue higher education.

II. OVERVIEW

Across the United States, low-income and first-generation students face persistent, deeply rooted barriers to accessing higher education. While some schools offer college support services, they are often underfunded, inconsistently implemented, or limited in scope. In Title I schools and small or rural districts, it is common for hundreds of students to share a single counselor, leaving little time for individualized guidance on applications, financial aid, and scholarships.

This reflects more than just a funding issue. It is a systemic failure tied to outdated policies, structural inequity, and the absence of culturally responsive

practices. My college roommate had one counselor for her entire grade and was left to manage the college process alone. I had a similar experience, my school had a program, but it lacked the structure and depth needed to fully prepare students. These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a broader trend affecting thousands of students each year.

What makes this issue especially urgent is that it continues to be overlooked. Students are expected to manage one of the most important transitions in their lives with little to no guidance, often just because of where they go to school or their family's income level. College access should not be a privilege; it should be a right, supported by systems that meet students where they are.

A. Relevance

College access is not just about whether higher education exists, it's about whether students have the knowledge, support, and guidance to reach it. For many low-income and first-generation students, the path to college is filled with hidden barriers: navigating FAFSA, understanding financial aid, writing essays, and choosing the right schools. These steps often require personalized help that many students simply don't receive.

In U.S. public high schools, the average student-to-counselor ratio is 408 to 1, far above the recommended standard, and even worse in

underfunded schools (ASCA, 2022). At the same time, only 28 percent of low-income, first-generation students earn a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 75 percent of their higher-income peers (NCES, 2021). Many of these students “undermatch,” attending less selective colleges or not enrolling at all, despite being academically qualified (Le et al., 2020).

The stakes are highest in Title I schools and rural areas, where resources are most limited. Without targeted policy action, the college access gap will continue to grow, leaving behind students with the talent to succeed but not the support to get there. This is not about giving anyone an advantage. It's about ensuring that every student, regardless of income or background, has a fair and meaningful chance to pursue higher education.

III. HISTORY

The college access gap faced by low-income and first-generation students didn't appear overnight, it was built over decades through underinvestment, policy neglect, and a failure to truly center equity in public education. Federal initiatives like FAFSA, Pell Grants, TRIO, and GEAR UP were designed to open doors, but in many ways, they've struggled to address the root problems: affordability, information gaps, and systemic barriers in schools that serve our most underserved students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Martinez & Welton, 2014).

During the early 2000s and through the Obama administration, there were attempts to close these gaps through programs like Race to the Top and College Completion Challenge Grants, which offered funding incentives to states and schools focused on increasing college enrollment. But access to these programs was

inconsistent, and many of the students who needed support the most never saw the benefits (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Programs like GEAR UP and TRIO serve hundreds of thousands, but still reach only a fraction of the students who qualify (IHEP, 2023).

Meanwhile, affordability has gotten worse. Pell Grants used to cover about three-quarters of college costs, now, they cover less than one-third. According to a 2023 analysis by IHEP, students from the lowest income backgrounds would need to contribute nearly 150% of their household income to attend a four-year college, even after financial aid (Vargas & Dancy, 2017). Students of color, especially Black and Native students, are even more likely to face high “unmet need,” leading them to take on more debt, work longer hours, or delay college altogether.

At the same time, many students are navigating the entire college process with minimal support. Public schools average over 400 students per counselor (ASCA, 2022), and in high-poverty schools, counselors often juggle responsibilities far beyond college advising. Research shows that students in these schools often receive vague or generic college information that fails to reflect their needs, realities, or identities (Schuur Sousa, 2016). Even academically strong students may “undermatch” enrolling in less selective colleges than they qualify for, because they lack the guidance to explore other options (DeBaun, 2020).

For students from immigrant families, bilingual households, or communities with limited college history, the barriers go even deeper. First-generation students are disproportionately from communities of color and low-income backgrounds, and they are less likely to have access to adults who can walk them

through the process (Afeli et al., 2018). Without culturally relevant support and a school system designed with them in mind, they're left to figure it out alone.

At its core, this issue isn't about ambition or ability. It's about access, investment, and whether we're willing to build a system that supports *all* students, not just the ones who were born into the right zip code.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. STAKEHOLDERS

The primary stakeholders in this issue are low-income and first-generation students, especially those from immigrant families, who are expected to navigate a complex, often overwhelming college process without the support systems other students might take for granted. These students are more often than not juggling application deadlines, financial aid forms, essays, college decisions, balancing school, work, and familial responsibilities. And the reality of this all is, many of them are doing it completely alone.

At my school, we had a college access program, or more accurately, a club that was run by just one staff member responsible for supporting hundreds of seniors. FAFSA help was technically available, but it wasn't helpful or clear. It often felt like someone was just supervising in the background while we tried to figure things out ourselves.

The people with the most decision-making power and responsibility are local school boards, state education departments and the U.S. Department of Education. These are the institutions that determine whether students get real access to college resources, or just surface-level programs. They control the funding, the

policies, and the accountability measures that shape what kind of support students actually receive. And far too often, their policies assume that students already have guidance when in reality, they don't.

For example, the Miami-Dade school district promotes a Career Pathway program that's supposed to connect students to college credit opportunities, but its website is filled with broken links and vague directions. This is not just an inconvenience, it's a barrier. At the national level, FAFSA delays in 2024 left thousands of students, in particular, first-generation and low income students, without the information they need to make informed decisions (Riley, 2024). According to NCAN, less than half of Florida high school seniors completed the FAFSA that year, even though over half were Pell-eligible. That kind of gap doesn't just happen unless the system is falling.

The lack of student voice is telling. Students are the ones who should be included, this is their future, and the decisions being made directly affect them.

B. RISKS OF INDIFFERENCE

If the barriers to college access for low-income and first-generation students continue to be ignored, the consequences will be long-term and systematic. When students are not supported through college applications, financial aid, and postsecondary planning, they are more likely to delay enrollment, choose a less aligned institution, or not attend at all. These outcomes are not the result of a lack of ability, but of inadequate support structures during critical decision-making periods.

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reported that as early as 2020, nearly two-thirds of jobs in the U.S. would require some form

of postsecondary education. That trend has continued, with growth concentrated in fields such as healthcare, STEM, and public service. Students who are locked out of higher education due to a lack of access, rather than choice, are also locked out of the economy of the future.

Without targeted policy intervention, these access gaps will continue to fall hardest on communities that have historically been underserved. Students who are capable of thriving in higher education will remain underrepresented in key fields, and the economic and social costs of exclusion will be felt at every level, from families to the national workforce. Inaction does not preserve the status quo. It deepens inequality and ensures that opportunity remains limited to those already positioned to succeed.

C. NONPARTISAN REASONING

Improving college access for low-income and first-generation students is not a partisan issue. It is a public priority that advances educational equity, strengthens the national economy, and maximizes the impact of public investments in education. The need for policy intervention can be supported by the following nonpartisan arguments:

1. Workforce development and national growth:

College access is directly tied to labor force participation, income, and civic engagement. Increased postsecondary attainment leads to stronger employment outcomes, greater economic productivity, and improved public health indicators (Long, 2007). Limiting access reduces the size and diversity of the talent pool needed to sustain a competitive economy.

2. Efficient use of public education funding:

When students graduate high school without receiving adequate college guidance, public investments in K–12 education fail to reach their full potential. Many academically strong students from low-income backgrounds attend less selective institutions or none at all, not because of academic limitations but due to a lack of advising and information (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Strengthening school-based college access programs ensures that these investments are not lost at the transition point.

3. Equity and institutional trust:

Persistent disinvestment in public schools has created conditions in which many students lack access to even basic academic support. In some districts, schools operate without counselors, college advisors, or structured readiness programs (Greene, 2016). This undermines trust in public education and reinforces cycles of social and economic exclusion. Expanding access to college is not just about opportunity, it is about demonstrating that all students are valued.

These outcomes serve broad social and economic interests. Policies that increase access to higher education are grounded not in ideology, but in fairness, efficiency, and long-term national benefit.

V. TRIED POLICY

There have been solutions implemented to try and close these gaps, ranging from academic support programs to structural reforms and financial aid interventions. One example is the AVID program, which combines rigorous coursework, mentoring, and cultural capital development to help

underrepresented students access college pathways. The program provides access to advanced courses, support systems, and a school culture that reaffirms college as a realistic goal (Bernhardt, 2013). While AVID has increased four-year college enrollment, especially among students of color, its success depends heavily on school-wide buy-in and a willingness to challenge practices like academic tracking.

Some school reform initiatives have focused on redesigning learning environments to better align with postsecondary expectations. These include implementing early access to college-level coursework, small learning communities, and rigorous, unified curricula that promote academic preparedness across student populations. Reforms are most effective when they combine high standards with strong adult-student relationships and support systems (*Martinez & Klopott, 2005*). However, these efforts are often underfunded or inconsistently applied, especially in districts already strained by limited resources or competing policy demands.

Financial aid reform has also played a central role, but its effectiveness is often undermined by complexity. Even when aid is available, students from low-income or immigrant backgrounds face barriers due to confusing application processes, unfamiliar deadlines, and limited advising. Behavioral nudges like text message reminders and simplified forms have improved outcomes in some cases, but only when paired with hands-on, personalized support (*Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016*). Without that guidance, many students who qualify for aid simply never complete the process.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS/SOLUTIONS

Improving college access for low-income and first-generation students requires policies that don't just exist on paper but are actionable, scalable, and grounded in student realities. The following proposed solutions are designed to directly address the gaps in college preparation, family engagement, and support that have consistently left underserved students behind.

1.) College Access & Readiness Course

This solution proposes a semester-long elective course in high schools that would provide students with structured, guided instructions on the college process which would include on how to research schools, understand financial aid, complete the FAFSA, write essays, and know what schools to choose. This would create a space that allows for self-reflection, goal-setting, and exposure to real college experiences. The solution would be piloting the course in a group of Title I schools before scaling statewide ensures that feedback is built into the policy. Research has shown that guided and embedded support like this is crucial as students in under-resourced schools often lack both the time and adult guidance to manage the process on their own (Ricks & Warren, 2021). By integrating these courses, it would transform college access from an extracurricular privilege into a core part of high school education.

2.) Multilingual Family Engagement Plan

The Multilingual Family Engagement Plan would ensure that families receive timely and accessible information about college and financial aid in multiple languages. This initiative would begin at the local level in select high-need districts, using translated materials, interpreted workshops, and culturally responsive

outreach strategies. Once refined through feedback and community engagement, it would expand to other schools across the state. Schools can better include parents and guardians, particularly those from immigrant or non-English speaking households, by making the college process clearer and more inclusive. Research has shown that family encouragement, even when parents haven't attended college, plays a vital role in student success. When families are equipped with tools and information, they become powerful sources of motivation and accountability (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Making the process navigable for entire households, not just students, helps reduce stress, misinformation, and the sense of isolation that many first-generation students report experiencing.

3.) College Access Navigation Hub (Virtual Platform + Recorded Workshops)

In addition to in-school curriculum and family engagement, students need flexible, accessible tools that meet them beyond traditional school hours. A centralized website that would serve as a virtual navigation hub, offering recorded workshops, interactive toolkits, and multilingual resources covering each step of the college process. These sessions would focus on topics such as FAFSA completion, scholarship applications, essay writing, and comparing financial aid packages. Also resources would be available in multiple languages and designed to meet the needs of students and families with demanding schedules or limited access to in-person support. When first-generation students receive step-by-step guidance that is consistent and easy to access, their rates of college enrollment and persistence improve significantly (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). By making these supports available online and on demand, this policy ensures that college

advising becomes a resource, not a privilege.

VII. CONCLUSION

College access is often framed as a matter of merit or ambition, but in reality, it is deeply tied to structural inequality. For low-income and first-generation students, simply knowing where to begin can feel impossible when support systems are inconsistent, underfunded, and completely absent. This brief has proposed concrete, research-backed solutions including curricular reform, multilingual family engagement, and virtual support hubs that shift responsibility off individual students and place it on the institutions meant to serve them. Addressing college access is not about giving students an advantage; it is about creating systems that ensure opportunity is not dictated by income, zip code, or family background. Real equity requires intentional design.

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