

The free tuition fallacy | Opinion

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Dr. Audrey Fisch of New Jersey City University and More Than Bootstraps says free tuition is not free college. If you can't pay for transportation, books, technology, and food, you can't succeed in college, even if you live at home rent-free.

By [Star-Ledger Guest Columnist](#)

By **Audrey Fisch**

Over the course of the pandemic, much has been made of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable, low-income populations of color, particularly in the realm of education. Many promising students, both in New Jersey and across the country, faced family illness, economic disruption, increased responsibilities for siblings and elders at home, and the challenges of virtual learning.

In this moment of heightened awareness of educational inequality, Congress is now weighing [four college affordability proposals](#). New Jersey, like many states, is also weighing a plan: the [Garden State Guarantee Initiative](#), which extends the existing free tuition for low-income students at our community colleges by adding free tuition for a third and fourth year at one of the state's public four-year institutions. If we are truly serious about improving access and unlocking the potential of a more broadly educated populace, however, we need to scrutinize the free tuition fallacy.

When Manny joined my course at New Jersey City University, he became the first in his family to enroll in higher education — a fundamental aspect of the American Dream that draws families like Manny’s to the U.S. He landed and thrived in my class because his persistence and academic accomplishments allowed him to overcome significant roadblocks. His education was fueled by a “full” scholarship and a small award by his high school, which covered his tuition and books for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Yet Manny, like many first-generation students, even those with scholarships, faces a harsh reality: A precarious educational future due to financial insecurity.

Starting in high school, Manny has been responsible for all his personal expenses (phone, clothing, etc.) as well as a portion of the household expenses; his mother’s manufacturing job covers the rent. During his first year of college, Manny balanced the standard 15-credit course load, which translates into 15 hours of in-class and 30 hours of out-of-class work, and 20-25 hours of out-of-school work: That comes to an energy draining 65-70 hours a week. In the spring, Manny found himself weighing taking time off from school. Despite his “full ride” and steady job, he was struggling to balance work and school and his income wasn’t enough to sustain him as a college student.

Sadly, Manny’s situation is common. In a national [#RealCollege 2020 survey](#) of 195,000 college students, nearly three in five reported an experience with food or housing insecurity. Given the focus on food and housing, it’s not surprising that first-time fall enrollment in higher education fell by nearly 20% for Latinx students, like Manny, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#).

Against the odds, Manny made it to and nearly through his first year of higher education. As the end of the pandemic approached, however, he faced a new obstacle: Commuting. Ironically, remote instruction was not an impediment for Manny but instead a support: Going to class simply meant turning on his computer (a gift from a family friend). Commuting in New Jersey, as we well know, would mean hours and money whether by public transportation or car. He decided to invest in a \$3,000 car.

I’ve seen so many Mannys go down this road. Despite a “full” scholarship, the economic demands outside of school weigh heavily on the academic demands inside school. The smart and the lucky – those who don’t get sick or whose cars don’t die or who have friends who can gift them more than just computers – can manage. But we lose many talented, ambitious young people like Manny, who want to acquire the postsecondary credentials they and N.J. need for a successful future.

Despite popular opinion, free tuition is not free college. If you can't pay for transportation, books, technology, and food, you can't succeed in college, even if you live at home rent-free. In fact, as measured by the full cost of attendance, the [National College Attainment Network](#) rates 0% of New Jersey's 4-year public colleges as affordable for the average low-income student (like Manny).

Some policy proposals now under consideration by Congress would provide significant assistance to students such as Manny; others, like New Jersey's Garden State Guarantee, fail to take into account the free tuition fallacy.

President Biden's [American Families Plan](#) would increase Pell funding by \$1,400 to \$1,800 (from \$6,495) – an incremental but not significant enough support for students like Manny. [The America's College Promise Plan](#), which offers free tuition at community colleges and minority-serving institutions, would offer students, who already have “full rides,” no relief. [The College for All Act](#), which doubles Pell funding to \$12,990, and the [Debt-Free College Act](#), which meets financial need based on the cost of attendance (and not the cost of tuition), would provide substantial support to students like Manny. As we emerge from a pandemic that has highlighted and exacerbated longstanding issues of educational inequality, Congress and states like New Jersey must address educational access. Manny wants to make his mother proud and has already proven himself academically. His chances of graduating from college should not depend on the reliability of his first car.

Dr. Audrey Fisch is Professor of English at New Jersey City University and founder and president of [More Than Bootstraps](#), a nonprofit focused on employing a stipend-based, near-peer mentoring model to help first-generation students access and succeed in higher education.

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