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The recurring debate over free higher education has intensified over the years as the tuition fees in some countries seemed to have increased at an overwhelming rate. In the U.S., this sudden increase is evidenced by the Federal Bank of St. Louis, which stated that college tuition fees have risen nearly eight times faster as compared to the increase in wages since the late 1980s (in Maldonado, 2018). During the same period, college dropout rates across the U.S. also had since increased at an alarming rate. In 2017, the completion rate of higher education only reached 57 percent, while 31 percent of the students dropped out entirely half way through their six-year college education (Cooper, 2017). The completion rate is predicted to decrease even more if higher education is completely funded by the government, as students may not feel responsible to finish what they have started, given such monetary incentive. This paper will describe the problem of high dropout rates resulting from completely state-funded higher education in the U.S.. It will also evaluate an existing solution and suggest an improved solution.

One of the consequences of implementing free higher education is that it causes students to lose their sense of financial responsibility, increasing the number of dropout rates. According to National Student Clearinghouse data, the national completion rate for students in the 2012 cohort pursuing their bachelors’ degree at a four-year public institution was 65.7 percent, while only less than 20 percent of the students from community colleges managed to graduate within six years (Shapiro et al.,2019). One of the reasons causing the high college dropout rate is the academic challenge that students face. According to a report by Bromberg & Theokas(2016), around 50 percent of students are not college-ready prior to entering college. This is evidenced by the data from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education(2010) which reveals that around 60 percent of college freshmen are required to take remedial courses before entering college annually(. Thus, given the already high college dropout rate caused mainly by the academic gap experienced by students, even before higher education is completely state-funded, removing all financial responsibility from students may not lessen college dropout rates (Amselem, 2017). Some may argue that the huge amount of tuition fee is the cause of students dropping out of college. However, research has shown that students who have taken a huge amount of loan for higher education do not simply drop out of college halfway through their diploma or degree(Bradley & Migali, 2015). In the UK, college tuition fees were increased by a factor of 3 from year 2003 to 2009, while the number of student loans granted increased by 20 percent, and dropout rates decreased by 4 percent (Bradley & Migali, 2015). This shows that the increasing college tuition fee is not the main cause for high college dropout rates. Therefore, if higher education is entirely state-funded, given the academic challenge students face, students may abuse the incentive as they do not have to worry about borrowing more loans for their extended period of higher education. An increase in withdrawal of classes would also be expected as students lose persistency when such monetary benefit is given to them.

Currently, the problem is addressed through the implementation of remedial courses. Remedial courses are classes without credits designed to help equip students who are more academically poor, especially in English and Mathematics, for college-level courses (Schak, Metzger, Bass, McCann, & English, 2017). According to a report by Jimenez, Sargrad, Morales, & Thomp(2016), 40 to 60 percent of college freshmen enrol in remedial courses annually. However, results from research articles regarding the effectiveness of remedial courses do not seem to be promising. According to Chen & Simone(2016), the completion rates for remedial courses at 2-year and 4-year public institutions are 49 percent and 59 percent respectively. Furthermore, results from research conducted by Complete College America have shown that only 14 percent and 44.2 percent of the students who completed the remedial courses successfully graduated from 2-year and 4-year public institutions respectively(in Nietzel, 2018). Undeniably, considering the fact that the increase in dropout rates may not be entirely caused by the academic challenge that students face during the transition from high school to college, remedial classes are not really efficient in addressing the problem of high college dropout rates. According to Destin(2018), psychological measures must be taken into account in order to effectively increase completion rates. Therefore, the imposition of preparatory education in the U.S. does not effectively improve the already-high college dropout rates.

One possible new strategy in addressing the issue of high college dropout rates in the U.S. is to dedicate more resources to student support services. According to Destin(2018), when colleges focus more on their students’ goals, students tend to have the sense of belonging as it creates a place for potential growth, hence inculcating perseverance amongst the students. Bettinger & Baker(2011) observed that the rate of graduation among students with student advisors was higher than those without by 4 percentage points. Furthermore, a research done by Jackson and Cook(2016) has shown that the California State University(CSU), consisting of 23 campuses around the state, successfully increased its graduation rate in the span of six years, starting from the year 2009 to 2015, after putting more effort into student advising and student engagement. These results reflect the effectiveness of the strategy and such a strategy should be deployed among the institutions for higher education in the U.S. According to Jackson & Cook(2016), some of the campuses are starting to implement e-advising software that enables advisors to connect with the students. In these applications, students are automatically appointed to an advisor who will mentor the students’ progress frequently.

In conclusion, the funding of higher education continues to be a controversial issue. This paper has discussed the problem of high dropout rates resulting from completely state-funded higher education in the U.S. In this essay, the effectiveness of the current solution, namely the implementation of remedial courses for academically weaker students is questioned and a new approach regarding the assignment of more resources in student advising is suggested. If the only option for the U.S. is completely state-funded higher education in the future, a further decrease in the college completion rate is expected. Therefore, it is crucial to address the problem by executing the new approach in order to increase students’ persistence and lower college dropout rates.

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