



In February, I lost my campus buddy, [Catrióna Rueda Esquibel](#), who passed unexpectedly. She was active across campus in a variety of roles and held the primary role of making sure that the College of Ethnic Studies ran smoothly as any college could. While she was associate dean, we communicated with each other nearly every day. Through our struggles tackling difficulties both internal and external to the college we grew close. She was my “ride or die,” and I have since felt frozen from such a deep sense of loss. Yet this month’s message on college as a common good is all about Catrióna, who left a tenure-track line at a prestigious research university to re-start as an assistant professor at State. She believed in the transformative power of a comprehensive university and loved the students we serve. She was a constant reminder that we should be proud of who we are as Gators, precisely because we are not a research university. Our staff and faculty believe that access to a college degree is a basic human right, and remain fully aware of the work and sacrifice that entails. It was precisely the reason why she committed herself to this institution even during times of great absurdity or personal hurt.

This past October, when the *Chronicle Higher Education* declared, [“The Return of College as a Common Good,”](#) I thought to myself “no duh” and wondered what bug living underneath a rock would ever think that a college degree was *not* for common good. It seemed obvious that a population with a higher number of [college degrees would create a more stable and kind society with a broad and encompassing middle class](#). Moreover, most faculty command classrooms hoping their students come out as better informed citizens and astute critical thinkers, rather than simply workers in an organization.

Yet, once I set aside my impatience, I realized that this article was actually about how people are increasingly thinking that government *should* invest in public education. [Broad support for forgiving student loans](#) is one of the signs that attitudes towards public education are improving. For me that rang as tremendously good news in the midst of an avalanche of bad news in higher education.

For over half a century, conservatives have sought to both dismantle American’s faith in higher education and divest from public education. Numerous publications place the origin of this movement in the mid 1960s when the [California Governor took particular aim at UC Berkeley](#), critiquing the institution as a place where “spoiled children of privilege” attended “sexual orgies” and political protests. To the then Governor and other conservatives who aligned with his views, education was a private as opposed to a public good and people should pay for college through tuition. Those who could not afford college

would then be tracked towards vocational degrees and technical certificates. For a number of education scholars this movement in education policy in the 1980s aligned too neatly with an unforeseen demographic shift in which the nation had become increasingly of color through immigration reform that had passed in 1965. [Thomas Philip](#) has argued that defunding and therefore denying public education to a populace growing increasingly of color is an act of white supremacy.

Yet a 2015 survey revealed that 31% of respondents believed government should shoulder the cost of education, up from 18% from a similar survey five years earlier, and in stark contrast to a survey in 1980 in which 80% of people believed students and their family should cover costs. Indeed in 2019, a third version of the survey reported that 43% of respondents now believe government should be mainly responsible for college costs. [Natasha Quadlin and Brian Powell](#) suggest that we are now in the midst of a perception shift, that more and more people are seeing education as a public good that requires collective effort. As perceptions shift, it's not surprising that voices against higher education are growing louder and more vitriolic. And notably, the opposition has a racialized and partisan bent, according to [Karin Fischer](#).

No doubt we have a tremendous hurdle in front of us. As national discourse devalues our profession, we must make certain that communities that will most benefit from a college degree are not discouraged by higher education haters. Who will you encourage to earn a baccalaureate degree?



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