

# Free Community College Will Only Make Things Worse

Like nearly all Americans, President Joe Biden believes that a college degree is the ticket to both individual economic advancement and uplifting the poor. To put his money where his mouth is, [he has proposed](#) \$256 billion in government funding to cover two years of public community college plus cash for living expenses. In an instant, an improved workforce and less economic inequality. What could go wrong?

Plenty, as critics note. But left unsaid in this opposition is an awkward reality: free classroom instruction will not elevate a deficient workforce. Ask any business owner or manager about hiring decent help—I myself owned and operated a small retail business for 14 years—and they all complain about finding workers with adequate “soft skills,” not sufficient book learning. Yes, there are some technical skills only available via classroom instruction, but for most of the workforce, particularly at the lower rungs, on-the-job-training usually suffices.

Enumerations of these “[soft skills](#)” often vary, but all employers have a pretty good idea of what they entail. Intelligence is vital. While employees need not be rocket scientists, they must be able to pick things up quickly and figure out new situations. Stupidity cannot be fixed by mentoring, training, pay boosts, or any other intervention. Hiring a dummy is worse than hiring nobody. The same can be said for honesty. Yes, a business might tolerate some employee theft or a little lying, but there are limits. Of further import are such personal virtues as dependability, punctuality, taking initiative, and dutifulness. What do you do with a new hire too lazy to learn required skills? Can anyone successfully run a business where employees regularly skip work, arrive late, depart early, drink on the job,

mismanage their time, and spend hours gossiping on cellphones?

Managers and business-owners are also aware of how employees can undermine the cohesion necessary for a healthy bottom line. Try holding meetings with thin-skinned, hyper-sensitive workers who chronically complain about discrimination or unfair treatment, especially if these workers routinely avail themselves of government intervention to reverse this alleged harm. Or try dealing with employees whose thorny personalities and egos disrupt teamwork. In my business I recall commission-obsessed salespeople who angered co-workers by hogging customers while neglecting non-commission, but essential tasks such as straightening up inventory. Sports teams know full well about the hazards of talented players whose selfish behavior hinders team success. Better to trade such disruptors to some other team.

There are, no doubt, other vital soft skills, but they all share one thing in common: *none* will be taught in a community college. There are no classes in good manners or dressing appropriately, let alone speaking clearly. In fact, the opposite may be true if the school tolerates indolence to keep government tuition money flowing. It is all too tempting to overlook erratic attendance or cheating if Washington's checks just depend on the body count. Under such conditions, students learn the very opposite of what makes for a desirable employee and so all this "free" money actually subverts Biden's supposed goals.

Underlying this mismatch between college and what employers need is culture. Soft skills reflect a distinctive culture, and not everyone embraces this culture. Honesty is not a universally admired trait, nor is punctuality, neatness, a strong work ethic, agreeableness, or multiple other "soft skill" traits so necessary to running a successful enterprise.

Even if community colleges recognized the importance of imparting these traits and possessed the recipe for the secret

sauce, this task would likely be rejected as “cultural imperialism” or, to be blunt, imposing whiteness on people of color. Besides, not everybody can be punctual and, that understood, perhaps workplaces should make reasonable accommodations for sloth and other similar costly inclinations, just as they now are legally required to accommodate those with certain physical disabilities. In today’s litigation-happy environment, any employer who refuses to provide such accommodations risks expensive government scrutiny and potential financial settlements. It is easy to imagine employees refusing to learn necessary job skills and insisting they suffer from some murky learning disability precluding them from mastering a computerized cash register.

Unfortunately, while this soft skill problem is universally known among employers, it is nearly unspeakable in public. No business owner can say that the local talent pool is hopelessly intellectually challenged and beyond help. Such honesty contravenes the current political dogma that all problems are fixable via education, and educational fixes will succeed if we just spend enough money. It is taboo to even hint that many of the poor suffer from intractable problems making them unsuitable for a modern economy.

All in all, Biden’s “solution” is just what you’d expect from a government careerist who never ran a business. As far as he is concerned, hiring more teachers at government expense will make the dumb smart and the lazy energetic.

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