

# Colleges Face a Reckoning: Is a Degree Really Necessary?

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Signs for Serve Wyoming and a Walmart Distribution Center outside Cheyenne, Wy. Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

On the outskirts of Wyoming's capital, two advertisements about a minute apart offered starkly different paths.

A nonprofit group's billboard promoted a way to earn money for college. The other, from Walmart, dangled pay exceeding \$30 an hour.

The dueling choices underscored a fundamental tension for the nation's teenagers and adults alike, one that has become vivid in the Trump era: Is college something all Americans need?

For decades, it was close to an article of faith among education leaders, scholars and politicians, regardless of political ideology, that most

people should go to college. But in many places, most jobs do not require college degrees, and doubts over the value of higher education have metastasized as student debt has soared and the ranks of dropouts have grown.

College has become a sharp dividing line in American life, and the disconnect between higher education's promises and its sometimes-frustrating reality has helped fuel a conservative movement to upend academia. Over the last decade, though, nearly every state tried to get more people to earn a certificate or a degree after high school.

Wyoming, which has just one public university, was among the states that bought into the campaign to push more of its residents toward higher education. Like most others, it made headway, but far less than it had hoped. And an uncomfortable question still lurks after seven years of trying to entice more students, even for people like Joe Schaffer, the Laramie County Community College president who both championed the state's ambition and warned of the siren song of Walmart's wages.

“How do we make education much more relevant to the student?”

### **An Ambitious College Campaign Begins**

Seven years ago, Dr. Schaffer's campus was where Wyoming's governor came to sign an executive order to try to marshal the state toward completing more higher education.

The share of college graduates who are considered “long-term” unemployed has [risen recently](#). But as Wyoming began its quest, researchers were projecting that most of the country's workers would soon need more than a high school diploma. And while Wyoming had among the highest shares of people who had finished high school, less than half of the state's working adults had any meaningful education beyond that.



Joe Schaffer, Laramie County Community College's president, has wondered if higher education always offers what students actually need. Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

That had worked just fine in a place where not even 40 percent of jobs demanded education after high school. But the economy hinged on the boom-or-bust cycles of energy, and young people were fleeing the nation's least-populated state for metropolises like Denver and Salt Lake City.

State leaders, hoping to attract industries that required more educated workers, envisioned an unusually unified approach that would encourage high school students to get degrees and also target adults. Officials calculated that if a quarter of the state's working adults earned a post-high school credential for the first time, the rate of Wyomingites with one would rocket past 60 percent, from about 46 percent.

Schools and policies would also need to change to cater to students who didn't fit the traditional mold.

“One of the biggest problems we have in education is inflexibility,” said Gov. Mark Gordon, a Republican who took office about a year after Wyoming started its push. “We tend to know what we know, by God, and we just need to do it harder and stronger.”



Attracting adults to return to schools like Laramie County Community College was one way Wyoming leaders hoped to bump up the number of people with college credentials. Credit...Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

The American right had been elevating voices that accused higher education of being hubs of liberal ideology and unnecessary for personal success.

But the governor argued that education could still be valuable — if it were more responsive and didn't bog down students with high costs and a maze of requirements.

It is a theory with wide traction. In 2009, a philanthropic group, the Lumina Foundation, announced a goal for 60 percent of Americans to obtain some credential past high school by 2025, up from 38 percent. The foundation's philosophy and largess helped fuel a stampede of state campaigns.

Wyoming set a goal of 67 percent by 2025, among the nation's highest targets.

### **American Confidence in College Wavers**

Lumina's efforts started when Americans appeared optimistic about higher education. Between 1998 and 2008, enrollment increased by more than 30 percent.

But more than a third of students seeking a bachelor's degree still were not finishing within six years. Community college completion rates were far worse. When Dr. Schaffer arrived in Cheyenne in 2012, for example, his school's graduation rate was 14 percent.

As the number of people who dropped out of college surged over time to more than 40 million, doubts about higher education were also swelling. Recent polling by Gallup found that the share of people who view college as "not too important" has increased sixfold since 2010, to 24 percent.

"What you hear in universities, all the time, for years, is, 'We just have to tell our story better,'" Ed Seidel, the University of Wyoming's president, said. "But I think we really have to look ourselves in the mirror and say, 'We need a better story.'"



Ed Seidel, the University of Wyoming's president, said universities need to rethink what they're selling, not just how they're selling it. Credit...Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

Still, officials nationwide plowed ahead. They sometimes confronted stubborn skepticism. It often had little to do with the debates over diversity programs, “woke” policies and academic freedom that dominate the current political battle over higher education.

Instead, many found that students who had dropped out had no interest in returning. Some feared costs. Some fretted over failing again. Many simply found themselves content in jobs that did not require additional education.

Jamie Merisotis, Lumina's president and chief executive, said states still made notable progress. Roughly 55 percent of adults in the United States now hold an educational credential beyond a high school diploma.

But for most states, the moonshot goals remained elusive.

## Trying to Rewrite the College Story

Daryl Woody finished eight years in the Air Force and six more as a housing maintenance contractor at the base in the Cheyenne area. But married with four children, Mr. Woody worried about being economically left behind.

He went to Laramie County Community College, figuring he could learn how to become a heating, ventilation and air-conditioning technician. After all, “I’ve been turning wrenches for so long that it comes natural,” he said not long after this semester started.

Then an academic adviser spoke with Mr. Woody about his interests and steered him toward the college’s cybersecurity programs instead. The school helped him chart his courses, talked through temptations of jobs in the oil fields or warehouses and mapped his potential long-term earnings.



Daryl Woody’s academic advisers at his community college have persuaded him to stay on track to graduate. Credit...Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

“The advice that I’ve been getting from all of the instructors has always been, ‘Do not let the good job take you from your education,’” he said. Without the guidance, he said, “I would have jumped on top of any number of those opportunities.”

He is on track to finish an associate degree next spring.

Higher education leaders and policymakers point to modest progress — Wyoming’s percentage of people with some credential past high school now stands at 53 percent — and lessons learned. Financial aid matters enormously. So do factors like the ability to transfer credits from one school to another and job-friendly scheduling to accommodate working adults.

Amanda Sorrell, a 30-year-old single mother who is studying business and accounting at the community college in Cheyenne, is part of a new scholarship program the state began for people at least 24 years old.



Amanda Sorrell is studying business and accounting on a state scholarship. Credit...Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

“That scholarship is really what’s helping me stay afloat,” said Ms. Sorrell, who takes online courses while juggling a market research job.

Encouraged by her advisers, she ultimately plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Laramie County’s graduation rate has risen more than 20 percentage points since Dr. Schaffer arrived.

But Wyoming, like other states that fell short of their goals, has also been working in recent years to tailor academic programs to society’s demands, reasoning that some students stay away because too little of the curriculum is relevant to their ambitions or interests.

Western Wyoming Community College started a substation technician program, the state’s first. Within the last decade, the University of Wyoming developed a major tied to tourism, one of the state’s biggest industries, along with a program in ranch management and agricultural leadership. Dr. Seidel, the university president, said schools should still make room for the liberal arts, but that higher education should have “a hard think” about what it offers.

During a politically volatile moment, and as colleges look for any students they can find, schools may have little choice.

In a recent speech, the education secretary, Linda McMahon, laid out talking points for the Trump administration’s ongoing attack on the nation’s universities.

“Attending these schools, for many students, feels like a burden. Or a waste. An obsolete and expensive credential,” she said, adding, “Don’t they realize? The alternatives to college are warming up in the dugout ready to replace the four-year diploma. This is not a time for dithering.”

Dr. Schaffer, of Laramie County Community College, acknowledges the nation's higher education model needs to be reset, as difficult as it may be. The answer, he thinks, might in fact be less, or at least more targeted, higher education.

“I don't know that we're going to find that next silver bullet,” he said. “So maybe it just takes a continued momentum and you keep whittling away, whittling away.”