

## DON'T LET COVID-19 LIMIT ACCESS AND COMPLETION OF COLLEGE

COVID-19 has further illustrated the impact from growing wealth disparities in America. Now more than ever, Oregon cannot afford to further this gap by turning our backs on highly motivated high school and college students who come from historically underserved backgrounds. Youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds earn college degrees at shockingly lower rates than their upper-income peers, due to systemic barriers in our education system.

By intensely supporting and mentoring Oregonian students who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and primarily first-generation and students of color, College Possible Oregon students are on track to graduate from college at a rate four times their peers who begin in college.

When the COVID-19 crisis caused high schools and colleges to close, and students were left with an uncertain future, College Possible Oregon stepped into the void by adjusting operations in order to meet the needs of our 1,800+ students. By immediately providing our students with needed technology, we were able to replace face-to-face coaching with online support services, such that we didn't miss a beat. College Possible Oregon's dedicated team knew that 70% of economically disadvantaged students and students of color who "take a break" from their path to a college degree never finish their degrees. Oregon cannot afford to fail yet another generation of economically disadvantaged students and perpetuate a structural cause for wealth disparities and inequities.

The 2007-08 financial crisis resulted in significant job losses, major decreases in post-secondary funding, increases in PERS unfunded liabilities and large increases in college tuition that caused students to take on staggering debt. Although the stock market dropped 50% during 2007-08, philanthropic giving only declined 7%. Foundations and private individuals understood the needs, including investments in education.

Why will the challenges from COVID-19 be any different? Clear dangers to our health meant immediately closing businesses, schools and colleges, and limiting our life-styles through stay-in-place requirements. This crisis is like no other crisis we have faced. COVID-19 is accelerating the shift in jobs that was already taking place due to technology and the growing knowledge-based economy, replacing blue collar jobs with robots in distribution and fulfillment centers like Amazon, replacing traditional white collar jobs with analytics and artificial intelligence based on big data, and using technologies such as Zoom and Slack to upend the way we work and deliver education. The imperative of our educational system to produce graduates with the skills needed to thrive in this rapidly developing future economy couldn't be more salient, especially for students coming from historically underserved backgrounds.

For the economically disadvantaged students and students of color served by College Possible Oregon, more support is needed as students navigate post-secondary education, prepare for the workplace, and develop civic skills to benefit our shared communities. College Possible Oregon helps these students from their junior year in high school through college graduation to develop the education and life skills they need to succeed. Our work post-COVID-19 is even more important. Why? College Possible Oregon can continue to provide the necessary guidance, career coaching and mentoring, which are services likely to be among first cut by colleges to address funding deficits resulting from the pandemic. Educated and wealthy households will be far better prepared to replace these lost services with advice based on their own experiences and introductions to their career networks than lower income and

underrepresented households with first-generation students. Our AmeriCorps coaches address this inequity by providing these services and becoming trusted advisors for our students.

Oregon has once again demonstrated leadership by rapidly taking steps to minimize the spread of COVID-19, and we can also show leadership by not allowing reductions in access and completion of college for economically disadvantaged students and students of color, or in successful and evidence-based programs like College Possible Oregon to support these amazing young people. We recommend the following actions:

- Ensure reauthorization and even expansion of the Corporation for National and Community Service at the Federal level, which enables AmeriCorps to support students through programs like College Possible Oregon, veterans, and the elderly.
- Maintain state funding for post-secondary education programs, and strategies to increase access and college graduation for economically disadvantaged students and students of color through scholarships and program support.
- Continue high levels of support from foundations, corporations and individuals for students in post-secondary programs, including CTE and STEM programs, and programs like College Possible Oregon.
- Address the needs of students with limited internet access and inadequate computers so that they will not be further disadvantaged by learning environments that will now be more online than ever.
- Engage employers in programs that support student learning in the workplace, improve hiring of diverse candidates in under-represented industries, and help better define career paths for students.

Implementing these recommendations will mean coming out of the COVID-19 crisis faster, improving the economy, and increasing equity in Oregon. College Possible plays an essential role by contributing to a triple-payback: 1) increasing the number of successful students who can break the cycle of multi-generational poverty, 2) providing a better prepared and more diverse workforce aligned with the needs of business, and 3) reducing federal and state social service costs that will likely increase as a result of COVID-19. College Possible Oregon is here to help in these difficult times and looks forward to working with all groups to get through this crisis sooner.

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