

PREFACE

I BEGAN WRITING this book amid the booming economy of 2019 and concluded it a year later in a very different world.

In 2019, unemployment was at a historic low and employers struggled to hire skilled workers. State finances had finally recovered from the fallout of the 2008 Great Recession, and most had returned to prerecession levels of funding for higher education. Income- and race-based gaps in college enrollment were narrowing, although gaps in degree completion remained, and college enrollment had leveled off due both to rising tuition prices and to a healthy jobs picture. Communities and states were forging ahead with the project of creating tuition-free college initiatives (sometimes called “Promise” programs) to meet their local needs. The free-college idea had gained traction within the Democratic Party and among the electorate, although concerns about cost and an absence of executive-branch leadership had halted progress at the national level.

A few months later, much had changed. By March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had brought the booming economy to its knees. Governors issued stay-at-home orders, and economic production and consumption dropped sharply. Schools and universities stopped

in-person instruction, and existing Promise programs quickly moved their support services online to help eligible students make their way to college in the fall. Applications for federal financial aid to low-income students plunged. Unemployment rose to unprecedented levels, and the falloff in economic activity blew giant holes in state and local finances. Uncertainty reigned. No one could know when the spread of the coronavirus would end, and it was difficult to plan. Would school buildings reopen? Would college students show up if classes were held online? Should community colleges expect the influx of adult learners they had seen in earlier recessions?

The coronavirus pandemic had deep racial implications as well. Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans were far more likely to contract or die from the virus than whites, directing attention to racial disparities in chronic health conditions, access to medical care, and employment patterns. The murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis in June 2020 was like a match to a flame, setting in motion a long-overdue reckoning not just with police practices but with systemic racism more broadly.

The twin phenomena of the COVID-19–induced recession and a widespread social movement for racial justice created, seemingly overnight, an altered context for free-college efforts. Now, the idea of free college was being driven forward not by employers’ need for skilled workers but by workers’ need for retraining. Now, the distributional benefits arising from free-college programs were not the stuff of academic debate but a possible avenue toward greater racial and economic equity.

The November 2020 presidential election was a watershed event. Joe Biden won a narrow victory, propelled into office by the Trump administration’s poor handling of the pandemic. While the president and his party are on record in support of a national free-college initiative, a deeply divided electorate and a narrow Senate majority constrain the Biden administration. Even so, free college—especially of the two-year variety—remains an appealing option to help the nation meet the needs of unemployed and unskilled workers while furthering racial justice.

This book seeks to respond to this moment, but I came to the project for two other reasons. The first is the story of my family and how access to a first-rate education at almost no cost vaulted my parents from poverty into the middle class. The second is the story of my adopted hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan, where a group of generous individuals with a new idea changed the future of higher education in the United States.

Both stories shed light on several fundamental realignments under way—the reality that a high school diploma is no longer sufficient for economic success, a rise in the price of college so relentless that college degrees are increasingly unaffordable for typical families, and a recognition that decades of efforts to close racial and income gaps in higher education have essentially failed. These three are related; more important, they are a recipe for perpetuating inequality and stifling the dreams of Americans young and old.

It was not always this way.

1938—Boston. Six people, three generations, in a two-room apartment. The mother, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, is raising four young girls and caring for her aged mother. Her husband has died, and two of her older children—the breadwinners—have moved to California for work. An adult son has died, and a baby has, too. When one of the girls falls ill, the doctor tells her mother it is rheumatic fever, the same disease that killed her son. The doctor says a warmer climate will be better for the child, so an older sister sends money to move the family west. The train ride takes five days. Eighty years later, the girls remember eating the hard-boiled eggs they had brought with them and marveling at the orange groves and palm trees out the window as they arrived at Union Station in downtown Los Angeles.

1942—Los Angeles. Another small house, this one home to ten family members. Four girls and their mother share a bed, and their brothers take the couch. The girls attend Los Angeles's then-excellent public schools, the children of immigrants all around them. No one talks about college. Their mother has only a few years of education and runs a liquor store to keep the family afloat. The oldest daughter graduates

from high school at fifteen and goes to work at the Veterans Administration; it is wartime and jobs are plentiful. At work, she meets doctors and lawyers, professionals with children in college. Wanting to learn more, she takes a day off from work and rides the city bus to the University of California, Los Angeles, only a few miles away. At the age of ninety-three, my aunt still has vivid memories of that day: “When I came up the stairs and saw the beautiful green lawn—the area even smelled different—I decided I was going to go to college.” Her mother, who knows nothing about college, nevertheless understands the value of education. She encourages her daughter to enroll right away, and the path has veered. A new story begins.

My aunt and her sisters attend and graduate from UCLA. They pay only nominal fees—the University of California system is basically free—live at home and ride the streetcar to class. They graduate with teaching credentials, then continue on for master’s degrees. They marry similarly educated men—engineers, teachers—also born to poor Jewish families, also educated at California’s public colleges and universities. Their children grow up in the middle class, barely able to envision the poverty of their parents’ youth.

Two decades later, I enroll at the University of California. It is 1976, and tuition is \$714 a year—around \$3,000 in today’s dollars. When I graduate four years later, the taxpayer revolt is underway. Proposition 13 is approved by voters in 1978, and the resulting limits on property taxes usher in drastic cuts to education. California’s public schools, among the best in the nation in the 1960s, begin their sad decline. Tuition at public universities begins its steady climb. Today, as the next generation of my family enters college, annual tuition at the University of California is approaching \$15,000 a year, with living costs, textbooks, and other expenses amounting to almost twice that amount.

In 1998, I move to Kalamazoo, a struggling midsized city in West Michigan. Seven years later, a group of wealthy individuals announce the Kalamazoo Promise, the first of a wave of place-based scholarships that cover college tuition for a large proportion of a community’s young people. Students in the Kalamazoo Public Schools, an urban

school district with high rates of economically disadvantaged and non-white students, learn they can go to college for free, just as my parents did. This changes the postsecondary aspirations of many of these young people, while also transforming their school district and community. The geographic accident of their living in a specific place at a given moment opens a pathway to upward mobility that runs through affordable higher education.

Can we create a world where such a pathway is available to all without the crushing burden of too much debt, where access to a valuable degree is a function of aspirations and ability, not of income? We are indeed on our way to this future, although the route looks much different than it did in the past. I write this book at a time of tremendous dynamism, with new forms of free college being introduced at a rapid pace and recent economic and social developments giving these efforts even greater impetus. But it is also a dangerous time. The speed of replication is so fast and public enthusiasm for free college so strong that there is the real potential for mistakes. We have already seen cases where promises were made that could not be sustained financially and design choices implemented that led to unintended consequences. These mistakes are avoidable, but only if we take the time to consider what we have already learned.

That is one of the goals of this book: to examine the landscape of free-college efforts, both current and past; distill the lessons they offer; and point a way forward that makes good on the promise of free college and restores opportunities that led families like mine out of poverty. But there is another goal—to make the case that free college is not just an investment in the success of individuals but that it also holds value for society. This dual-value proposition and its intergenerational impact played out in my personal history when access to an inexpensive, high-quality education brought benefits not just to my parents, but to their children and grandchildren, and to the state in which they lived. My story is just one among many, and in chapters 4 and 5, I tell the stories of several individuals I have met whose experiences illustrate the individual and societal implications of free college or its lack. These

are true stories, and I am grateful to the individuals who were willing to share them.

Speaking of gratitude, this book would not have been possible without my two employers, Grand Valley State University and the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, both of which provided financial support for this project. In my years of studying the free-college movement, I have had the privilege of working with many talented and generous individuals. At the Upjohn Institute, these include Tim Bartik, Dan Collier, Brad Hershbein, and Bridget Timmeney, all of whom devoted time and effort to help make this a stronger book. I am also indebted to those outside the institute who reviewed and commented on the manuscript, including Celeste Carruthers, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Emily House, Jennifer Iriti, Martha Kanter, and Chuck Wilbur, as well as leaders of Promise programs who helped ensure the accuracy of my work, including Krissy DeAlejandro, Saleem Ghubril, Greg Handel, Bob Jorth, David Rust, Sylvia Thompson, and Von Washington. My Upjohn Institute colleague Elizabeth Kellogg went above and beyond to ensure the quality of the manuscript. I am grateful to Nick Visscher for preparing the figures. I have benefited throughout from the guidance of Jayne Fagnoli, my editor at Harvard Education Press (HEP), who had the initial idea for this book and guided it to completion with insight and kindness. The editorial, production, and marketing staff of HEP was also a pleasure to work with; I am especially indebted to Jane Gebhart for her careful copyediting. The opinions expressed here and any errors are my own, but it is these relationships that have helped me learn and grow, and they are part of what keeps me excited about the free-college movement.