

From the Desk of *Joe Fisher*

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A FOUNDER'S REFLECTION ON COLLEGE, CHOICE, AND OPPORTUNITY

From the Desk of Joe Fisher is a series of founder reflections written by Joe Fisher based on his experiences and perspectives. Supporting research and contextual content may be contributed by members of the FGCB team and alumni. Lisa Jones contributed to this issue.



The phrase "college is not for everyone" is one of those statements that always makes me stop and think.

Not because I completely disagree with it. But because when I was growing up, nobody said it.

I grew up in the housing projects. College wasn't something we talked about. It wasn't something we saw. It wasn't something we expected.

The goal was simple: graduate from high school and get a good job.

Some people joined the military. Some went to work for the government. Others found jobs in private industry. A few started businesses. What made those pathways possible was that our schools

offered vocational education and career training that prepared students for real jobs.

My brother attended Phelps Vocational High School and studied drafting. My sister learned secretarial and administrative skills, including shorthand, and eventually worked for the U.S. State Department for more than twenty years with benefits. Those opportunities changed lives.

Back then, nobody needed to say college wasn't for everyone because students had options.

What I find interesting is that the phrase has become more common at the same time many of those options have disappeared.

Over the years, vocational education was reduced or eliminated in many schools. At the same time, college costs increased dramatically. Students were encouraged to borrow more money. For-profit colleges expanded. Many young people were told that college was the only pathway to success, regardless of cost.

When some of those students struggled under the weight of student loan debt, a **new narrative began to emerge.**

Suddenly, people started saying college wasn't worth it. Or college wasn't for everyone. But I believe those are two different conversations.

The problem isn't education. The problem is debt. The problem is sending students into educational pathways without **helping them understand the costs, the benefits, and the alternatives.**

For more than thirty-five years, First Generation College Bound has worked with students and families who believed college was simply too expensive.



Many families assume that if they did not save for college, their child cannot attend. That's simply not true.

What we've learned is that information matters. Students who understand financial aid, state grants, community college options, and transfer pathways often discover opportunities they never knew existed.

A student does not always need to start at a four-year institution. Community college can provide an affordable starting point while allowing students to earn credits, explore career interests and reduce costs. From there, many students successfully transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

The key is having a plan.



First Generation College Bound is best known for working directly with students and families, but we also recognize that some barriers require broader solutions.

Through participation in the Maryland Alliance for College Affordability and Equity, FGCB has joined other organizations across the state in educating policymakers about challenges facing first-generation and low-income students.

These efforts have helped improve access to financial aid, strengthen FAFSA outreach, protect need-based aid programs, and support improvements to the Next Generation Scholars and Education Outreach & College Access Maryland Programs.

While no single policy can solve every challenge, removing barriers and improving access helps ensure that more students can pursue higher education based on their potential—not their circumstances.

When students and families understand how to combine federal and state financial aid with affordable college pathways, they can often earn a degree with far less debt than they imagined.

That's why our work has never been simply about helping students get into college. It's about helping them get through college in a way that is financially sustainable.

I often think back to my neighborhood when I was young. I remember seeing adults leave for work every morning and return home every evening.

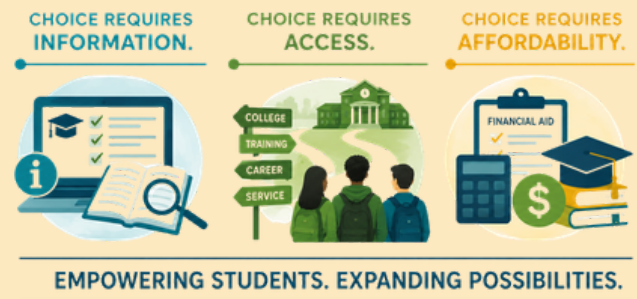
What I don't remember is seeing students leave for college or come home from college. There were no examples around us. That's why visibility matters.

When young people see someone who looks like them attend college, graduate, and build a successful life, possibilities begin to expand. They start to believe they can do it too.

That doesn't mean every student should attend a four-year college immediately after high school. Some students will thrive in apprenticeships. Some will enter the military. Some will pursue career and technical education. Some may start businesses. All of those are valuable pathways.



The real question is not whether college is for everyone. The real question is whether students have meaningful choices.



Without those things, many young people are not making choices at all. Their circumstances are making the choice for them.

I still believe vocational education deserves renewed attention and investment. Students should graduate from high school with multiple pathways available to them.

We should value career training *and* college preparation. We should respect skilled trades *and* higher education. This should not be an either-or conversation. It never should have been.

The more education, training, and knowledge a person acquires, the brighter their light becomes. Education helps people navigate change, solve problems, contribute to their communities, and create opportunities for themselves, their families and communities.

So, is college for everyone? No. But opportunity should be. Every student deserves the chance to choose a path based on their interests and aspirations not on a lack of information, resources, or support. That is the work that has guided me for more than thirty-five years, and it remains as important today.



The debate about college has changed significantly over the past several decades.



THEN: More Pathways After High School

For much of the 20th century, students often had multiple pathways available after high school. Vocational programs prepared students for careers in trades, manufacturing, administrative work, and technical fields. A high school diploma often led directly to stable employment.



TODAY: Rising Costs and New Concerns

Many families now face a different reality. College costs have increased dramatically over time.

Student loan debt has become a major concern for many families. Some students leave college with debt but without earning a degree.

Interest in skilled trades, apprenticeships, and career training has grown.

Public confidence in the value of a four-year degree has declined in recent years.



WHY Completion Matters

Research suggests that students who borrow money but do not complete a degree face some of the greatest financial challenges.

Students who leave college without completing their programs are more likely to struggle with loan repayment and are significantly more likely to default on student loans than graduates.

This reality contributes to growing concerns about college affordability and value.



WHY Information Matters

Many students and families overestimate the cost of college and underestimate the financial aid available to them.

Federal aid, state grants, community college pathways, transfer agreements, and other support programs can significantly reduce the cost of earning a degree.

Understanding these options is often the difference between viewing college as impossible and viewing it as attainable.



The Bigger QUESTION

The debate should not be about whether college is for everyone.

The bigger question is whether students have access to the information, resources, and opportunities needed to choose the pathway that is right for them.