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Whatever Happened to When College Was Free?

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The transformation of higher education and how you can be in on it.

These days, tuition at public colleges commonly rises five, seven, or even 15 percent in a single year, and students shoulder five- and six-figure debts to pay for their degrees. It's easy to forget that it hasn't always been this way: Many public colleges and universities were once tuition-free.

In 1847, Baruch College, now part of the City University of New York system, was founded as the Free Academy, the first free public college in the country. In 1862, the first Morrill Act established public universities through federal land grants, many states opted to charge no tuition or nominal tuition. California's public-university system, still the largest in the

nation, abolished tuition three months after it was founded in 1868, [implementing instead a fee for additional services, such as health care, that at first was tiny.](#)

The era of free tuition ended, ironically, with the student movement of the 1960s, just as campuses were getting more populous, diverse, and democratic. Ronald Reagan made the University of California a major punching bag of his 1966 campaign for governor of California, with the encouragement of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who saw campus peace activists as dangerous subversives. Upon taking office, Reagan managed to have UC president Clark Kerr fired—he had been the architect of mass higher education not just in California, but across the country—and hiked fees at the UC colleges to the approximate levels of tuition charged elsewhere.

A similar story happened in New York. In the 1960s, blacks and Latinos made up less than one-fifth of all students at CUNY schools, and most were confined to a non-baccalaureate track. The same colleges that had offered the city's Jews and other immigrant groups important opportunities for advancement in the 1930s were frustrating the dreams of a new generation.

In the spring of 1969, students at City College staged a campus takeover, hanging a banner that proclaimed the school that had once been known as the "Harvard of the poor" to be "Harlem University." Student activism and community support led the state Board of Higher Education to vote swiftly to open CUNY admission for the first time to all city high school graduates. However, only a few years after the college was fully integrated, in 1976, CUNY's board voted to impose tuition for the first time. It seemed that citizens could support free education, or open education, but not both.

So what's wrong with charging tuition?

The obvious problem is that tuition, [even when offset by scholarships and financial aid, makes college harder to access for lower-income students.](#)

Sticker shock and debt aversion drive away many who might be able to take advantage of financial aid. Studies show that [lower-income students absorb the message that college is "too expensive," often as early as the eighth grade](#) and make decisions about their futures accordingly. And sometimes

there isn't enough aid to make college affordable. In 2007-2008, according to the Institute for College Access and Success, 80 percent of community college students had unmet need averaging over \$5,000.

The more subtle problem with charging tuition is that it has changed the cost structure of higher education. Traditionally most colleges other than for-profits get revenue from public subsidies and private philanthropy as well as tuition. According to a [2009 study by the Delta Cost Project](#), a primary reason that state colleges have been increasing tuition by such whopping increments—[5 percent a year](#), after inflation, over the past decade—is that they're losing state revenue, and shifting costs toward students. Unlike other areas in our economy, higher education hasn't exactly been a model of efficiency or innovation. As costs rise, colleges have responded by raising tuition bills, allowing federal and private student loans, as well as family piggy banks, to absorb the difference.

Are there ways to revive and champion the radical ideal of "free" in higher education? I see two options: One harkens back to the 19th century model; the other is more reminiscent of the 1960s. First, free colleges could be traditional colleges deploying philanthropic resources combined with frugality. In 1859, [Peter Cooper](#), an industrialist and autodidact who believed that education should be as "free as water and air," founded the [Cooper Union](#) in Manhattan. The college's dedication to free tuition (technically, each student receives a full-tuition scholarship worth \$35,000) means it must skip "extras" like a gym, a student union, or even a large cafeteria. Their selection of majors also remains tightly focused on engineering, architecture, and art.

In addition to Cooper Union, the [Work Colleges](#), a consortium of seven private liberal arts colleges, many located in rural settings and with religious roots, are either free or at least committed to graduating students debt-free, and require students to work in everything from groundskeeping to admissions, in order to defray their costs. (Check out two more lists of free colleges [here](#) and [here](#).)

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The other model for free education goes back to the teach-ins and free schools of the 1960s, where communities banded together to teach about topics that were generally left out of traditional colleges. In the past decade, the Internet has made

this DIY attitude possible on a broader scale than ever before. [Academic Earth](#), [OpenEd](#), [The OpenCourseWare Consortium](#), [Connexions](#), [Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources](#), [Wikiversity](#), [YouTube EDU](#), and [iTunesU](#), are each a vast universe of free, open educational content, whether in stand-alone lectures, organized into short units or full-length courses.

Attempts to take advantage of this wealth of material and organize free learning communities are still in the beginning stages. They include OpenLearn, an online community organized around open educational resources by the [Open University in the UK](#); the [School of Everything](#), and [Unclases](#)—both platforms where teachers can find students, and [Peer2Peer University](#), “an online community of open study groups for short university-level courses.” Also, the [University of the People](#) is an online-only nonprofit offering bachelor’s degrees in business and computer science using open texts. And you can also start your own on-the-ground free learning community, as Mary Blackburn has done with her small-scale experiment, [the Anhoek School](#) or use a platform like [NaMaYa](#) to set up your own school for free.

Education is a right. Free college is an important part of the movement to make that right available to all.

[Anya Kamenetz](#) is a staff writer for Fast Company and author of "[Generation Debt](#)." Her new book, "[DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education](#)" is available now.

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