

Compulsory schooling laws could bolster free community college argument

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Providing two years of free community college to qualifying students is expected to be a hot topic during the 2016 presidential campaign.

President Barack Obama introduced the plan earlier this year, aimed at boosting educational attainment and workforce opportunities of thousands of students—especially those from low-income families. Support for expanded education is not the purview of one party, however; President George W. Bush also frequently referenced the significance of two-year colleges. Tennessee and Oregon are offering free [community college](#) to qualifying students.

A University of Kansas researcher has found—as part of a recent study published in the journal *Social Forces*—that educational expansion worked once before in creating better jobs and upgrading the opportunities of the American workforce.

Emily Rauscher, a KU assistant professor of sociology, examined state-level data from 1850 to 1930, when states began instituting compulsory schooling laws requiring students to attend school up to a certain age. She found that compulsory schooling laws significantly increased school attendance rates, especially among lower-class children, and also shifted the occupational distribution toward skilled and non-manual occupations.

"These findings suggest that building a more educated workforce helped create more skilled jobs and raised the occupational distribution," Rauscher said.

Even though the findings of her study centered on data that is decades old, it could provide useful insights today regarding economic development and the potential benefits of creating a skilled workforce, she said. As states adopted compulsory schooling laws, those most affected were students of lower socio-economic status, whose parents worked in mostly non-skilled and manual labor jobs.

Access to more education gave these students broader opportunities to pursue careers that weren't limited to non-skilled and manual labor. Importantly, Rauscher noted that the benefits were not limited to the students affected by the laws. The types of jobs available changed for everyone.

In their book "The Race between Education and Technology," economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz point out that education in the early 20th century helped promote innovation but also generated new technologies that favored non-skilled occupations and shifted the occupational distribution away from skilled occupations.

This is still a concern now, Rauscher said, as technology in some cases cuts into manufacturing jobs in the United States. Communities with lower socio-economic status or lower levels of education tend to suffer the most from this type of change.

"If we could help kids of lower [socioeconomic status](#) and non-white kids get at least to community college, then that would be beneficial for everyone," Rauscher said. "It would be beneficial for them, and it would be beneficial for society too in creating better jobs."

Rauscher pointed out that the reason for these benefits is unclear. She said the students who benefitted from compulsory schooling laws could have created new businesses or entered existing companies with ideas that would create and produce more skilled jobs for others.

Alternatively, students who attended school were likely more prepared to enter the work force as they learned how to behave on the job and other soft skills that are necessary for a productive employee.

Sociologists today, such as Robert Putnam, author of the book "Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis," grapple with economic inequality and maintain it is more difficult than it was 50 years ago for children of lower socio-economic status to move up the ladder.

Rauscher, whose study measured effects at the state rather than individual level, said her findings suggest a structural or large-scale change in education policy could benefit students at the bottom of the economic ladder.

A blanket federal compulsory education law mandating that all U.S. [students](#) attend school until age 18 or a proposal similar to a community college mandate could make a difference, she said.

"I would hope that you could have similar benefits today from that type of policy because it could help address the concern that it's harder to move up the social ladder," Rauscher said. "By creating more good jobs - or opportunities near the top of distribution - that would at least give more possibilities for people to move up."

Provided by University of Kansas

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