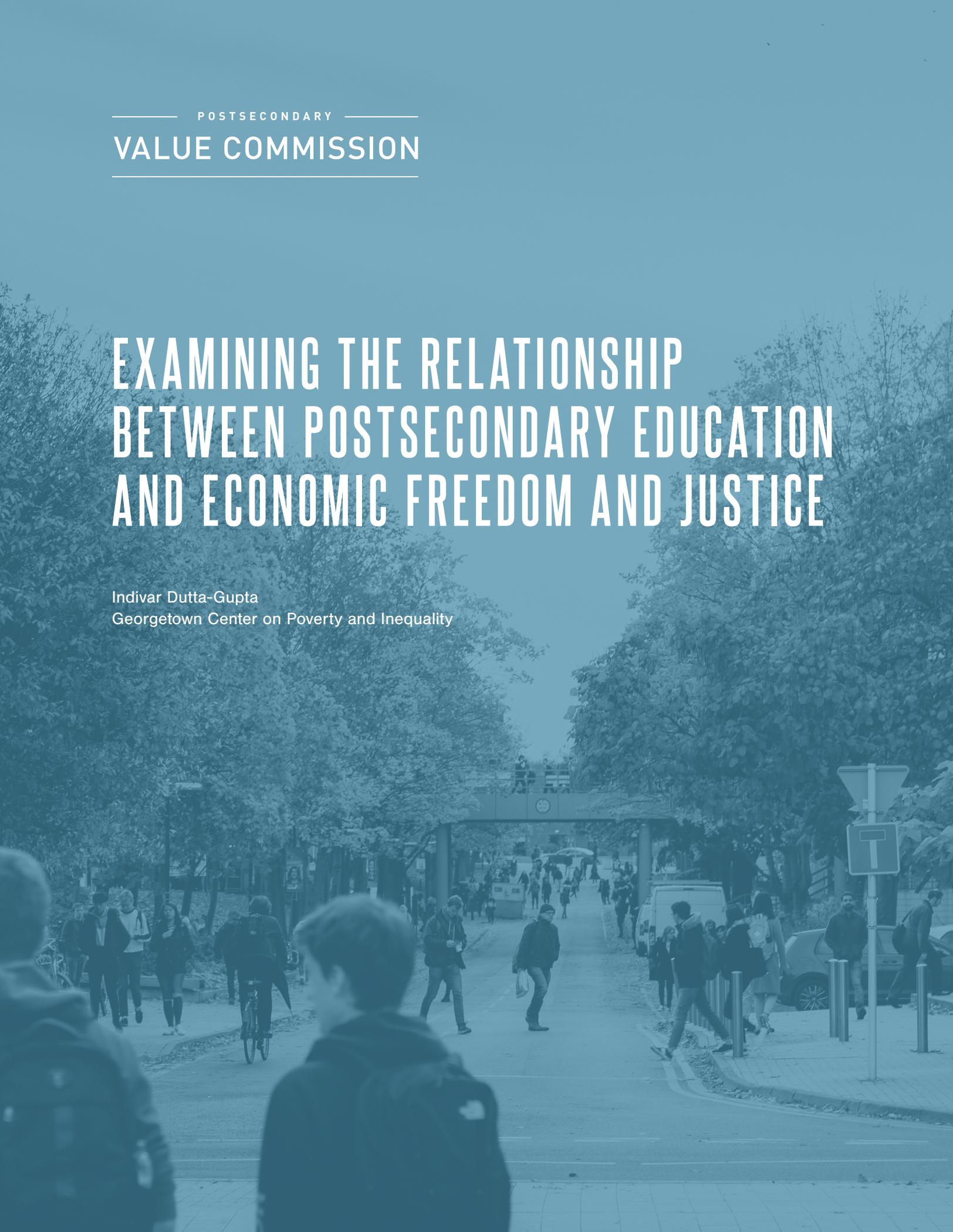


POSTSECONDARY  
VALUE COMMISSION

# EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC FREEDOM AND JUSTICE

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This paper is one in a foundational research series for the Postsecondary Value Commission authored in summer 2019 by scholars with diverse backgrounds and expertise. The research presented in these papers applies an equity lens to the philosophical, measurement, and policy considerations and assumptions underlying key components of postsecondary value to students and society, including investment, economic and non-economic returns, mobility, and racial and socioeconomic justice.

The Postsecondary Value Commission consulted this foundational research as it developed a conceptual definition of postsecondary value, a framework for measuring how institutions and programs create value and ensure equitable outcomes, and an action agenda with recommendations for applying the definition and framework to change policies and practices. Through this breadth of scholarship, the commission was better able to define the value of postsecondary education and the role institutions can play in creating a more equitable and fair United States.

Following the May 2021 release of the commission’s findings, these foundational papers were prepared for publication. The views and opinions expressed in these papers do not necessarily reflect the positions of individual members of the Postsecondary Value Commission or the organizations they represent.

The Postsecondary Value Commission along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Institute for Higher Education Policy are deeply grateful to the authors of this series. The authors’ extensive expertise and thoughtful engagement in this work provided the foundation for the commission to develop an informed, innovative, and equity-driven framework. They also thank Deborah Seymour for editing the written products and the team at GMMB for their creative design and layout.

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# INTRODUCTION

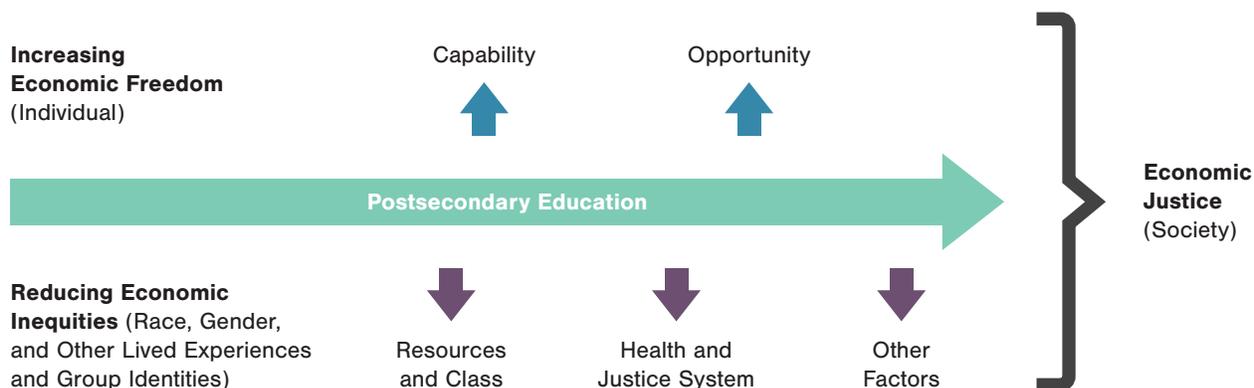
The notion of individual freedom is valued by virtually all social, economic, and political belief systems. To be sure, how it is defined is heavily contested, it is never valued without limits (i.e., it is not an absolute value that trumps all other values), and it is less central to some moral and political philosophies than others. However it is defined, individual economic freedom is a core aspect of economic justice. By advancing individual economic freedom, education—including postsecondary education—can advance economic justice, insofar as it also reduces socioeconomic disparities (Figure 1).

If, instead, education—including postsecondary education—maintains or expands socioeconomic disparities, it can undermine justice. Countries with the most diversified and desirable economic opportunities typically have high and widespread educational attainment, which likely contributes substantially to the creation of those opportunities. Because education benefits more individuals, it enables them to have greater freedom to pursue a wider array of life choices. In contrast, societies with the most limited economies often have low and concentrated educational attainment rates among their populace. As a result, often only the wealthiest individuals are highly educated. Such a society not only has greater socioeconomic injustices, but, ironically, the educated elites have less freedom to pursue economic and life choices than they might have in a country with more widely shared educational attainment and economic prosperity. One person's freedom may come into tension with that of another; but overall, freedom is far from zero sum. For example, mandating and ensuring universal health coverage financed through taxation can expand freedom by advancing a basic foundation of health care access—a foundation that can promote entrepreneurship, job switches, family formation not driven by financial need, and other valuable life choices.

Notably, a society could shrink socioeconomic gaps *without* expanding freedom, but doing so would undermine justice. For example, any moral framework worthy of consideration surely would indicate that the Black-White infant mortality gap should be closed by shrinking Black infant mortality, not by growing White infant mortality.

It is likely that income, wealth, and class gaps will always exist—and income and wealth gaps may be acceptable insofar they are no more than what is necessary to create incentives for socially desirable activity. To be sure, income and wealth gaps as they exist today in the U.S. are extreme and harmful and must be shrunk to more justified and socially beneficial levels—and some gaps, like those by race, are simply unjustifiable. To better understand how postsecondary education affects economic freedom and justice, this paper first outlines the interplay between freedom, justice, and education, with particular attention given to the capabilities approach framework (Figure 1). It then discusses potential indicators for guiding and evaluating practical implementation of this framework. In doing so, this paper contributes to philosophical, measurement, and policy considerations for defining and measuring postsecondary value, especially for undergraduate credential attainment.

**Figure 1. Postsecondary Education Affects Key Aspects of Freedom & Justice**



Source: Indivar Dutta-Gupta, Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, August 2021.

## THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ECONOMIC FREEDOM, JUSTICE, & EDUCATION

This section first discusses how to conceptualize economic freedom. It then turns to a conceptual discussion of how addressing social and economic power differentials is central to advancing economic freedom overall by expanding it for those with relatively limited freedom. It concludes with an argument for using the capabilities approach framework to examine how access to high-quality education expands economic freedom.

### Conceptualizing Economic Freedom

Economic freedom is surely a central and widely shared value that animates American policymaking as seen throughout its history: from the classical liberalism that underpinned some of the United States of America’s founding; to the eventual abolition of chattel slavery; to FDR’s Four Freedoms—meant for all of humanity;<sup>1</sup> to today’s political debates around empowering individuals and families. Despite the concept’s universal appeal, operationalizing economic freedom is context-specific. One intuitive and internationally operationalized way to think about individual freedom and agency is to think of it as comprised of individual capability (“i.e., the opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings—what a person is able to do or be,” according to one of the originators of the concept, Amartya Sen)<sup>2</sup> and access to opportunity (a lack of obstacles, barriers, and interference in pursuing meaningful life goals).<sup>3</sup>

This sort of thinking is embedded in legal instruments enshrining rights to education, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which is an international human rights treaty that has been ratified by 170 state parties across the world to date.<sup>4</sup> The ICESCR ensures the robust right to education for all, and one of its articles states that “Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education...”<sup>5</sup>

Rights depend on context. Indoor plumbing may have been a luxury a century ago, but today we would work hard to ensure it in prison even for people who have committed heinous crimes. Where might we draw the line for education as a right in the United States? Primary and secondary education—and increasingly, early learning and education—are arguably broadly seen as universal rights. Postsecondary education is rarely discussed in this manner, and it may instead be seen as more of a privilege by some. However, the increasing need for a college education to live a decent life today compared to half a century ago suggests that it may be appropriate to consider fair access to at least a four-year postsecondary degree a universal right.

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## Equalizing Economic Freedom

One area where theories of justice differ is the extent to which a society should seek to equalize fundamental economic freedom. Contrary to the common perception that freedom and equality are necessarily and always in tension, economic justice advocates often argue precisely for roughly equalizing fundamental freedoms. For example, the Civil Rights movement arguably was a fight for people of color to have the same freedoms that White Americans largely already enjoyed, including: access to public accommodations, adequate and integrated education, decent work, and protection from discrimination.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Dr. King’s historic 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech was delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>7</sup> Within the LGBTQ+ movement, the fight for marriage equality is the same as the fight for the freedom to marry.

A live example that ties directly back to the March on Washington’s call for a higher minimum wage<sup>8</sup> is the Fight for \$15—a movement to raise the minimum wage and ensure access to unions.<sup>9</sup> The millions of people who work in low-paid jobs with little prospect for advancement and cannot afford rent, food, transportation, or other bills in the wealthiest country in the world are an embodiment of extreme inequality in the U.S. today. In an important sense, it also represents an effort to achieve one of FDR’s Four Freedoms—freedom from want—and realize portions of FDR’s Second Bill of Rights. As FDR spoke to Congress, “We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. ‘Necessitous men are not free men.’”<sup>10</sup> These examples all illustrate how addressing social and economic power differentials is fundamental to achieving economic freedom.

## Education as Freedom

As it did in 1963, economic justice today depends on equal access to quality education across historically advantaged (e.g., White, high-income students) and disadvantaged groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, first-generation students). Conceptions of freedom typically depend on the ability to understand and affect the world around oneself insofar as that allows some level of choice and control over one’s life. This concept, known as the “capabilities approach,” includes the knowledge and skills that command decent remuneration in the labor market. For example, among enslaved African Americans, education was often advanced as a path toward liberation.<sup>11</sup>

The “capabilities approach” was initially developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and others to conceptualize and measure human development, and the capabilities framework can be operationalized through survey and other data. For example, available data on British households happen to reflect many key capabilities and can be used to measure wellbeing within a capabilities framework.<sup>12</sup> The framework has since expanded to highlight the importance of income, health, imagination, reason, and thought, each of which is advanced through education.

Applying this capabilities framework to higher education might lead us to ask several key questions, including: to what extent postsecondary education expands the set of choices students have with regard to careers; whether it promotes a sense of concern for others’ freedom and agency; and whether it empowers students to shape their

“ **Attainment of quality postsecondary credentials is tied to economic freedom.** ”

own educational experiences and pathways. One way students are empowered is by developing and advancing cognitive skills (which already have strong metrics), like practical reasoning, that can help students exercise their own agency.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these competencies, other skills that are more challenging to measure, including both conscientiousness and the ability to trade tasks and work in teams,<sup>14</sup> can be nurtured in college and are in demand in the labor market. Attainment of quality postsecondary credentials is therefore tied to economic freedom. This line of reasoning does not justify the existence of bad jobs, as all jobs can be made decent and fair, regardless of the skill required. Rather, the ability to qualify for a wider range of occupations and careers allows individuals greater control over their lives—even if all jobs were similarly compensated.

## INCREASING FREEDOM, REDUCING INEQUITIES THROUGH POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

This section discusses a few dominant avenues through which postsecondary education may increase economic freedom and help achieve economic justice. Most prominent among these is postsecondary education’s impact on individual and household economic resources, primarily income and wealth. In general, adults with certificates and undergraduate credentials benefit from higher earnings and employment, which plays a role in wealth accumulation, when compared to their counterparts with just a high school degree or some college but no degree.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, adults from low-income families are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education,<sup>16</sup> and in part as a result, are more likely to experience stagnant or declining wages and are less likely to move up the income ladder.<sup>17</sup> This experience also impedes low-income individuals from accumulating wealth at similar rates as their higher-income peers.

Postsecondary education also can expand economic freedom by improving health<sup>18</sup> and reducing justice system involvement.<sup>19</sup> Good health allows people to access and take advantage of economic opportunity, while justice system involvement has the opposite effect. Postsecondary education should help people achieve their fullest health and avoid justice system involvement, while closing gaps across race, gender, and other identities. The final avenue discussed is education-specific indicators, including student skills, postsecondary attainment, and public interest employment.

For each avenue, several indicators are explored, though none are perfect. Indicators must be considered holistically, and new ones must be developed to reflect societal changes and data improvements. Well-theorized and well-measured indicators shed some light on our challenges and progress toward achieving goals. Indicators focused on freedom and agency broadly reflect how capabilities are developed and opportunities are made available. Indicators reflecting progress toward economic justice tend to focus on shrinking inequities. Notably, inequities should be closed in manners that indicate broad progress, rather than regression or reversal of prosperity.

## Income

Cross-national research suggests that happiness or subjective wellbeing tends to rise only modestly with income after \$95,000 USD annually for life evaluation (the extent to which people believe they are living the best possible life for themselves)<sup>20</sup> and \$60,000 to \$75,000 for emotional wellbeing (feelings of “enjoyment, happiness, anger, sadness, stress, worry,” and the like).<sup>21, 22</sup> More research could tie these subjective evaluations to a sense of agency and freedom and could explore methods to adjust these thresholds by geography and family size. Due to substantial differences in costs across geography and among household compositions, even a rough income threshold at which people have a secure and meaningful level of economic freedom to make a wide array of life choices likely varies substantially. Research to develop geographic adjustments for poverty measures is ongoing,<sup>23</sup> as existing adjustments have shortcomings,<sup>24</sup> and this ongoing research could be leveraged to deepen understanding of income’s relationship with agency and freedom.

A wide range of strategies is available for shrinking income inequality, ranging from worker empowerment and job creation to strengthening our economic security system and advancing decriminalization.<sup>25</sup> Income gaps will always remain, though there is no justification for income gaps across racial and other groups; racial and other gaps persist due to longstanding and new structural barriers from employment and housing discrimination to the War on Drugs and mass incarceration.<sup>26</sup> Very low levels of income can be harmful in the short- and long-run, including through the toxic stress typically associated with well-below-poverty incomes. More fundamentally, philosophers, like those behind the capabilities approach have argued that improving human functioning (basic “beings” like being well-nourished and “doings” like travelling)<sup>27</sup> rather than happiness alone should guide efforts to improve wellbeing and advance justice.<sup>28</sup> Functionings and capabilities can be measured at the individual or household level through indicators such as income, educational attainment, longevity, bodily integrity, adequate housing, the ability to enjoy the love of others, and so on.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the conversion of goods and services into functionings and capabilities can vary substantially across a population.

## Indicators

**Income-to-Poverty Ratios:** Despite shortcomings with the official poverty measure and the more updated Supplemental Poverty Measure, living below 100 percent (poverty) or 200 percent (“low-income”) of either threshold is generally strong evidence of exposure to material and other hardships such as food insecurity.<sup>30</sup> In addition, postsecondary education’s impacts on incomes could be compared to higher thresholds of decent living standards, including a range of family budget and living wage calculations that typically result in thresholds that are two to four times

federal government poverty thresholds.<sup>31</sup> Ending poverty is at least attainable among those with a postsecondary credential (and beyond) within a generation, since poverty refers to a floor above which all should live. In contrast, it is less clear what the ideal relative intergenerational mobility rates might be, since relative mobility is zero sum, requiring the status of some to fall for those of others to rise. Regardless, upward mobility among children with lower income is surely indefensibly low.

**Median Income:** Rising median household income measures indicate growing living standards, and this percentile may approximate levels of income required for achieving high levels of subjective wellbeing. Though half of households must fall below the median, ensuring that those with lower incomes are within striking distance of the median (typically 60 percent of the median)<sup>32</sup> may be a useful measure (and is a target of many other wealthy countries, including the European Union, which uses it as a measure of social exclusion—essentially a floor below which no person should fall).<sup>33</sup> As with all society-wide measures, postsecondary education's contribution may be limited. That said, it is notable that large increases in college attainment without commensurate increases in labor market demand for those credentials would reduce the average college earnings premium, even as it could shrink racial and other gaps.

## Wealth

Postsecondary education can affect wealth through two broad channels: 1. requiring wealth and debt to access education, and 2. increasing the ability to build wealth, in part through income accumulation. Wealth itself provides economic security and access to upward mobility. For example, college attainment among people from the lowest fifth of the income distribution can quadruple their chance of reaching the top fifth of the distribution.<sup>34</sup> Even so, wealth gains from college appear substantial for Whites, but are often lower to non-existent for non-White households.<sup>35</sup> Today's dramatic and longstanding racial wealth gap contributes to disparities in educational attainment by race. As with income gaps, wealth gaps will always remain, but there is no justification for persistent racial, gender, or other wealth gaps based on demographic characteristics.

### Indicators

**Household Net Worth at Low Deciles:** To determine positive and meaningful levels of household net worth, one could calculate an amount of wealth that allows for home ownership, entrepreneurship, and basic economic security during periods without income from work. Then, one can calculate what percentage of median wealth is equivalent to that minimum level required for economic security. If individuals from the lower end of the wealth distribution reach at least this percentage, it reflects access to economic security and opportunity.

**Racial Wealth Gap:** Today, Latinx and Black individuals have a fraction (one-fifth to one-seventh) of the wealth of White individuals.<sup>36</sup> Relative and absolute measures of median and lower-percentile Black and White household wealth ratios can indicate progress toward racial equity. Focusing on both the absolute and relative ratios together can help ensure that progress is made primarily by typical Black households' statuses rising. Economic justice requires the full closure of these gaps, though significant progress would advance justice.

## Health

Postsecondary education affects health, which is intrinsically valuable, but also, in turn, affects virtually all social and economic outcomes. Indeed, health is sometimes considered a component of human capital.<sup>37</sup> Higher education attainment appears to causally improve health outcomes ranging from life expectancy<sup>38</sup> and disability status<sup>39</sup> to chronic health<sup>40</sup> and self-reported health status.<sup>41</sup> College attainment likely causes increases in life expectancy in the United States,<sup>42</sup> potentially through higher socioeconomic status, greater social and psychological resources, healthier behaviors, and greater cognitive functioning.<sup>43</sup> These effects vary substantially by demographics, and in some instances, including for some Black individuals, can turn negative.<sup>44</sup> Poor health and having a disability are significantly and causally associated with poor economic outcomes, including lower employment and earnings,<sup>45</sup> though postsecondary education has been shown to improve economic outcomes among people with disabilities.<sup>46</sup>

### Indicators

**Life Expectancy Gaps:** Measures of life expectancy at birth can reflect the potential to develop capabilities and access opportunities. Life expectancy across racial and demographic groups should be broadly similar, but current variation is driven by exposure to lethal violence, infant mortality, and other causes that themselves reflect limited freedom and agency. Incorporating educational attainment data into current official vital statistics datasets could help researchers discern whether higher education institutions expand or shrinks gap in life expectancy.

**Disability:** Measures of disability by age, race, and gender can help monitor progress toward economic justice. The chance of experiencing a disability rises substantially with age, especially in middle age and late adulthood. However, age-adjusted disability rates should not vary across socioeconomic and demographic groups. People with disabilities are markedly less likely to complete a bachelor's degree in part due to a number of unique barriers,<sup>47</sup> which impacts employment and earnings outcomes. Measures of postsecondary attainment by disability status are worth monitoring if we want to reach a more economically just society.

## Justice System

Postsecondary education affects justice system involvement, which in turns undermines freedom (economic and otherwise) and economic justice. Higher education may shrink chances of justice system involvement, especially for the most disadvantaged (such as children living in high poverty areas),<sup>48</sup> including by reducing future justice system interaction among those in prison. Particularly clear is that postsecondary programs in prisons reduce recidivism in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

### Indicators

**Criminalization:** A substantial share of Americans have some documented criminal justice or law enforcement system-interaction, and many will receive a hit on a criminal background check, which limits their access to jobs, housing, credit, and even public benefits. Measures of the share of people with this particular disadvantage—and racial gaps in these measures—will help reveal the extent to which overcriminalization undermines freedom and justice. Data do not currently allow measurements of the effects of postsecondary institutions in reducing justice system involvement among the most marginalized groups but measuring such effects would help reveal an important value of postsecondary education.

**Incarceration:** Experiencing or having experienced incarceration is intrinsically a massive assault on one’s freedom. The consequences are typically more intense and durable than with other justice system involvement. Incarceration contributes to poverty and inequality. All other things equal, lower incarceration rates and lower incarceration disparities by race and socioeconomic status would advance economic freedom and justice. As with criminalization, data should be collected, and measures developed to identify the effects of college on shrinking disparate rates of incarceration across demographic groups.

## Education-Specific Indicators

**Student Skills:** Much inequity in individual capability is apparent at the beginning of and throughout school-age years. Cognitive and noncognitive skills gaps by socioeconomic status for those entering primary school and again at key developmental milestones can indicate how equitably society is helping families nurture children’s talents and abilities.

**Postsecondary Attainment:** College access and completion rates, 8 years from enrollment, by family and individual background—including lived experiences and group identities like race, gender, veteran status, and having experienced homelessness—are useful because they shed light on whether access to higher education is equitable as well as how advantages and disadvantages are transmitted to the next generation. These rates should be broken down by region, institution type, and programs of study, all of which can affect the value of a credential. College often can expand freedom for students, especially if they receive a credential and are not saddled with debt.

**Public Interest Employment:** Public interest employment (including government employment and not-for-profit employment) is typically less remunerative than private, for-profit employment, but should be a viable part of the set of options that a college graduate faces upon graduation. When combined with measures of access to postsecondary education, measures of post-degree participation in public interest jobs could indicate an important value of college. Outcome measures, like those capturing labor market experiences, are best combined with access measures to prevent institutions from influencing outcomes by changing who is admitted to and enrolls in them rather than by improving the life chances of students who reflect society at large.

## CONCLUSION

Economic freedom can be conceptualized in terms of individual capabilities and access to opportunities. Ambitious and sweeping goals of growing freedom while reducing (and in some cases, eliminating) unjustifiable disparities, including by race, gender, and class, will advance economic justice. Postsecondary education affects major aspects of individual freedom and social inequities. Ensuring that it contributes to, rather than detracts from, economic justice will require attention to a wide range of factors, including how postsecondary programs are accessed and deliver on—or fail to deliver on—their promised benefits, especially for marginalized students. As such, postsecondary economic value could be defined as the following: **Postsecondary education should nurture the capabilities that provide students access and ability to experience a wide array of life activities within their social context and throughout their lives, while shrinking economic gaps based on group identity and lived experience.**

While there are a battery of empirically tested and theoretically appealing metrics available to help measure the impact of postsecondary education on expanding freedom and agency, especially under the internationally-operationalized capabilities approach, further measurement development is needed. For example, measurements should focus on college access and impacts (i.e., the contribution of college to positive economic outcomes). Administrative data can measure access, including for the most marginalized in our society, such as students in prison. Representative surveys (with oversampling for smaller historically excluded groups) and tests could measure institutional impacts on students across a range of capabilities at the beginnings and ends of their undergraduate programs and compare those students—individually and in groups (to identify group inequities)—to plausible controls.

Ultimately, postsecondary education can play only so much of a role in advancing economic justice. However, if it did all it could to advance economic justice, our society likely would show improvements and at least some gap closures in available measures of economic outcomes—all other things being equal.

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