

Pete Buttigieg Proposes Free College for Low-Income Students, Increased Pell Grant

[By Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)

As over a dozen Democratic presidential contenders vie for the primary nomination, many seek to differentiate themselves from the competition by releasing detailed plans on a variety of subjects including free college and student loan debt forgiveness. On Monday, Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, mayor of South Bend, Indiana, released his \$500 billion [plan for higher education](#).

Among other things, Buttigieg's platform includes a proposal to increase the maximum Pell Grant award by \$1,000, to notify students of their eligibility for the federal grant as early as the ninth grade, and to guarantee funding for the program through mandatory entitlement spending. He also proposed making public college tuition-free for students from families making up to \$100,000 per year. For those from families making up to \$150,000 per year, Buttigieg proposes "substantial tuition subsidies."

"A college degree has long been a ticket to well-paying jobs and fulfilling post-graduate opportunities — and for many Americans, a pathway to the middle class," Buttigieg wrote in the plan. "But today, college costs students and their families more than ever before."

The plan promises a \$120 billion infusion into the Pell Grant to give low-income students support for basic living expenses. Buttigieg's plan also proposes tying the maximum Pell Grant award to inflation so in the future it would keep pace with increases in tuition and living costs.

"Over the last 30 years, as states have steadily decreased investments in their public higher education systems and college costs have continued to rise, students have shouldered more of the costs themselves. Federal investments have failed to keep pace, shifting more financing from grants to loans — especially for students from the lowest-income families who most need a leg up in accessing middle-class careers," Buttigieg wrote. "[I] believe that students, particularly low- and middle-income students and students of color, need a better path forward."

Buttigieg's plan also seeks to notify high school students, starting in their freshman year, about their Pell Grant eligibility and proposes extending Pell Grant eligibility to students in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program since those students, many of whom are currently attending college, are not eligible for federal financial aid and have limited access to other forms of financial resources. He also suggests having the federal government complete most of the FAFSA for these students to help close "a huge gap in college access for lower-income high school students."

The cost of tuition and fees is not the only financial struggle students are facing as household incomes fall around the nation. Recent reports have found that many college students are struggling to meet [basic nutritional needs](#), which leads to decreased levels of sleep, higher levels of stress, and lower levels of energy. [More than half](#) of students with children dropped out of higher education before earning a degree — compared to one-third of students without children, as of 2009.

Buttigieg's plan would address these issues by proposing expansions in federally-funded child care subsidies, investing \$2 billion to expand the free and reduced-price lunch program, and providing food vouchers to students enrolled at community colleges.

Some students continue to face financial struggles beyond college after either dropping out or defaulting on their student loans. Buttigieg proposes a number of potential solutions, including automatically enrolling student borrowers in income-driven repayment plans, canceling the loan debt of students who attended institutions that failed the gainful employment regulations, and imposing new restrictions on private student loan corporations.

The plan also addresses the Public Student Loan Forgiveness program that has been [heavily criticized](#) by Democrats, such as during a recent House Committee on Education and Labor [hearing](#). Buttigieg's plan would grant individuals working in the public service sector graduated levels of debt cancellation for each of the first 10 years of service and full debt cancellation after 10 years of service.

“For too many students, a college degree remains an unfulfilled dream — even once they enroll in college. More than 40% of students who start college do not graduate, and black and Latinx students graduate at lower rates than their white classmates,” Buttigieg wrote. “Leaving school without a degree collectively costs students billions in lifetime earnings and greatly increases their risk of defaulting on student loans.”

Read Buttigieg's full [higher education proposal](#), and stay up-to-date with the latest in the 2020 presidential race with NASFAA's [Presidential Cheat Sheet](#).

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