



## House Bill 3296

### Testimony Before the Texas House Committee on Higher Education

*By Erin Davis Valdez, Education Policy Director*

#### **Chairman Kuempel, Vice Chair Paul, and Members:**

My name is Erin Valdez, and I'm education policy director at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. I'm here to voice our support for HB 3296.

Enrollment in community colleges suffered after COVID-19, [falling about 11% since 2019](#). Some of this decline is due to a hot labor market, especially in the food and service sectors.

Yet it is important not to talk about these kinds of jobs as a second-class option. All work has dignity and can provide a context for learning soft skills, such as punctuality, communication, and conscientiousness, and so it is important to celebrate engagement in the labor force. According to economist Nick Eberstadt, and using the most recent available data, 6.4 million prime-age, able-bodied men are neither engaged in the workforce nor pursuing an education. This amounts to “two and a half prime-age men who were both un-working and not in school for each one who was jobless but seeking work,” a proportion that has grown significantly since 1965 (*Men Without Work*, pp. 72-73).

A hint as to one of the causes for male flight from education and the labor force may be provided in our [most recent research](#), which shows that high school program offerings for career and technical education are mostly in the health sciences and not in the skilled trades. Professions that may be interesting to young men in particular are those that are most sparsely provided. Thus, two-year colleges have a uniquely important role to play in engaging and educating students who may not have been exposed to the opportunities in the skilled trades in their secondary education.

Young people need to know that pursuing postsecondary education can help hedge against the threat of labor market changes, especially in some service industry jobs. But we should not oversell some professions over others, and we should continue to encourage young people to develop their unique skills, understanding that continuous learning will need to happen over a lifetime. The jobs we now regard as “safe” choices may not be, and those that we have de-emphasized may emerge as more robust options in the future. Recent advances in AI have shown that the [jobs now most vulnerable](#) to disruption are white collar jobs previously thought to be impervious, such as law and accounting, and that other jobs, such as those in logging and manufacturing are “less exposed” to the risks of automation.

The passage and implementation of HB 3296 would help make a case for why postsecondary education matters for longer term success both to prospective students and the public because it will provide transparency in for three key indicators:

- placement rate,
- average first-year wages of graduates, and
- percentage of graduates enrolled in institutions of higher education.

These indicators can help students make informed decisions about their futures and policymakers to understand and communicate the value of a postsecondary education in a time of increasing and somewhat unpredictable disruptions in labor markets.

Thank you and I'm happy to take any questions.

**Erin Davis Valdez** is the Policy Director for Next Generation Texas, an initiative of the Foundation. She has been passionate about the transformational power of education all her life, having been given the gift of being homeschooled. She taught for over a decade in Austin-area schools and served as an assistant principal at a charter school in Lewisville. These experiences have given her the opportunity to see first-hand how students can thrive when they have excellent options.

Since joining the Foundation, Valdez has conducted research on career and technical education at the secondary and post-secondary levels, civics education, and welfare to work programs in Texas.

Valdez earned an M.A. in classics from the University of California, Santa Barbara and a B.A. in classical studies from Hillsdale College.

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