

**INTERVIEW** *Published May 19, 2025 • 11 minute read*

# Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Sarah Reber

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On the last episode of Interviews with Influencers: College Completion Day Edition, Emily Rounds (Education Policy Advisor) sat down with Dr. Sarah Reber, Senior Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution and holder of the Cabot Family Chair. They discussed what research reveals about the most effective strategies for boosting college completion, why complexity in the financial aid system remains a major barrier, and how simplifying and strengthening core policies can better support today's diverse student population.

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## Video Transcript

**Emily Rounds:** Welcome back to Interviews with Influencers! My name is Emily Rounds, Education Policy Advisor here at Third Way, and I'm your host for this special edition of the podcast.

As College Completion Day approaches on May 19th, we are featuring experts that are helping students not only get into college, but also through it. For the last episode of the College Completion Day edition

of the podcast, we are joined by Dr. Sarah Reber, Senior Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution and holder of the Cabot Family Chair. Sarah's research dives into the economics of education and the policies that support college access and student success.

Thank you so much for being here, Sarah. I'm excited to chat with you.

**Dr. Reber:** Thanks for having me.

**Emily Rounds:** We're going to start with a big question, so feel free to take this in the direction of your choosing. As someone who has devoted your career to researching the economics of education, can you tell us a little about the strategies or interventions that we know work to help students get through college? And what evidence do we have for those different strategies?

**Dr. Reber:** In December, we released a report in which I reviewed a lot of rigorous studies of college access and completion programs. There's been a lot of work in this area over the past couple of decades. I focused on studies that used randomized controlled trials, so we can have confidence in the causal effects of those programs, or quasi-experimental methods, like natural experiments. That's the type of evidence I'm drawing on.

We categorized programs into three major types. First, advising and coaching programs—this category covers a lot, with a fair amount of variation, but essentially, students are assigned to someone who helps them navigate college. The second type includes more comprehensive programs that aim to address a range of barriers all at once. These usually include advising, tutoring, financial aid, special scheduling, and more. We called the third category “low-touch” programs, which are generally inexpensive interventions like sending reminders or providing simple informational nudges.

Across these programs, it's pretty clear that the most effective approach is the comprehensive model that tackles multiple barriers at once. A standout example is the CUNY ASAP program. Originally implemented in the CUNY community college system, it offers advising, tutoring, financial aid, flexible course scheduling, learning communities, and even a MetroCard. A randomized controlled trial found that it doubled completion rates.

Since then, ASAP has been expanded—first to community colleges in Ohio, and now it's been implemented in a number of other contexts. So I'd say it's a model with a strong evidence base for scalability and replication. The downside is cost. The original CUNY version was quite expensive, though they've done a good job of reducing costs in later implementations, like the one in Ohio. Still, it can be costly, and some institutions struggle to sustain it financially.

That's why we shouldn't dismiss the other approaches like coaching or advising programs. These tend to have smaller effects but are also less expensive. So if an institution or a state has the resources to implement a program like ASAP, they should go for it. But if not, that doesn't mean they should give

up. Thoughtful, deliberate coaching programs, or incorporating low-touch elements into existing services, can still be helpful.

**Emily Rounds:** Awesome. Thank you. On the topic of funding, in your view, how does the way we fund higher ed impact student success, especially for students who face more barriers to completing their degrees?

**Dr. Reber:** After reviewing this research, one of my biggest takeaways is that our higher education financing system is far too complex. That complexity is itself a major barrier.

We've developed programs to help students navigate this complexity by informing them about costs and how to access and complete college, but that only gets us so far. The complexity of the system is something we should be addressing directly. Interestingly, the average net price that families pay for college has actually been flat or even declined slightly over the past decade. That said, college is still too expensive for some students, and that remains a real issue. We've also shifted from a low-tuition, low-aid model to a high-tuition, high-aid model, which makes it much harder for students to understand what they'll actually have to pay.

Financial aid can also change from year to year in ways that are unpredictable or confusing. A student might get a bill they weren't expecting after they've already enrolled. That's a serious problem. We need to simplify the system and give students reliable information earlier on about what college will cost them.

In some states and at certain types of institutions, affordability is still out of reach—even if students understand the costs. So transparency and simplification alone won't be enough; we also need more targeted subsidies in certain places. In other cases, just making the system more understandable could open the door for more students.

**Emily Rounds:** Do you think that the complexity of financial aid and higher education funding also creates challenges for high school and college staff who are trying to support students? I know you mentioned transparency and I know that there are a lot of good people working in higher ed who want to make a difference, but know that finances might also be a barrier for them to help students.

**Dr. Reber:** When you look at college access interventions, especially those aimed at high school students, the financial aid piece is often the hardest part. That's partly because it's complex, but also because many high school counselors don't feel confident or qualified to advise on it. That puts them in a tough position. No one wants to give students incorrect information, especially when the stakes are high. If a student gets hit with an unexpected bill, that's understandably upsetting.

So counselors may stick to generalities, but even then, there's a high risk of being wrong. That's why we need to make the system simpler—so the people trying to help students can do so more effectively.

There's evidence from programs that shows how powerful simplification and certainty can be. Take the Kalamazoo Promise, for example. Every student in Kalamazoo public schools knows they'll get a full ride to college if they graduate. That removes the uncertainty and allows counselors to build a strong college-going culture. Even though many of those students might have gotten similar financial aid by applying on their own, the guarantee and simplicity itself makes a difference.

The Michigan HAIL study showed similar results. They offered a guarantee of four years of tuition support to low-income students at the University of Michigan, and that significantly boosted applications and enrollment. The researchers argue that the certainty of that aid was key.

That said, not all promise programs have been equally effective. We still have more to learn, but there's solid evidence that simplicity and clarity in financial aid messaging really matter.

**Emily Rounds:** That was great. Thank you so much. How do you think the federal government could better direct funds to promote college completion?

**Dr. Reber:** Personally, I'm less focused on the federal government funding specific "college completion" programs and more focused on strengthening the core functions of government that support access, completion, and quality across the board.

First, as we've discussed, the complexity of the financial aid system undermines its effectiveness. Students may not realize they're getting a subsidy, or that they could, so we're not getting the full return on our investment.

Second, I'd advocate for shifting more of the financial support to the front end—through programs like Pell Grants—so students can see and understand that college is affordable before they take out loans. Right now, we're spending a lot on the back end through loan forgiveness, and while that may change depending on what happens in Congress and the courts, it's not the most efficient way to support students.

Third, we need to provide better information and implement stronger accountability. Institutions should have incentives to support students and offer strong programs. At the same time, students need clear data to help them choose programs where they're more likely to succeed.

And finally, we need to make sure that systems like FAFSA and student loan servicing actually work. These are fundamental access points, and right now, they haven't always been functioning well.

One more thing: the federal government plays a crucial role in funding research. There are still a lot of unanswered questions about what works in higher ed, and we need strong evidence to guide policy. Unfortunately, the current administration has pulled back from supporting research in this space, and I think that's a mistake.

**Emily Rounds:** Now, the two of us—and probably many of our listeners—are deep in the weeds on higher ed policy and research. But making the case for college completion to someone outside the field, like the average taxpayer, can look very different. So, in your view, why should everyday people care about investing in getting students across the finish line?

**Dr. Reber:** I'll start with the importance of helping students cross the finish line, but I think we should also step back and consider why we invest in higher education in the first place. Students who start college but don't complete a degree tend to face poor financial outcomes. Not only are they worse off individually, but they're also less likely to contribute through higher tax payments. They're also the group most likely to default on their student loans, which means the government isn't recouping the money that was borrowed. So helping students complete their degrees can prevent a lot of these negative outcomes.

We especially don't want students to get derailed for what I'll call "dumb reasons"—like bureaucratic hurdles or small financial setbacks—after they've already invested so much time and effort. It's a loss for them, and it's a loss for taxpayers.

That said, we shouldn't be laser-focused on completion alone. What matters most is supporting productive investments in education. Sometimes college doesn't end up being the right path for someone, and that's okay. We shouldn't view every non-completion as a failure. But if a student drops out because of avoidable barriers, like a missed form or unexpected fee, that's the kind of issue we should be solving.

More broadly, I think we're seeing a cultural shift away from valuing higher education. But the data doesn't support the idea that college isn't worth it anymore. On average, the return on investment is still strong. Yes, outcomes vary, and we absolutely need to address the cases where it's not working. But things like economic growth, innovation, and even tax revenues rely on having an educated population.

And importantly, without public support, many people wouldn't be able to pursue higher education, even when it would be a good investment for them and for society. So taxpayers should want to make sure students who are close to finishing aren't knocked off track by addressable barriers. And more broadly, we should be helping people develop their talents so they can contribute in meaningful ways.

**Emily Rounds:** Thank you. To close us out, if there's one thing you'd like policymakers to understand about current students in this country, what would it be?

**Dr. Reber:** First, today's college students are incredibly diverse, and they face a wide range of challenges. Some are traditional students who go straight from high school and live on campus or at home. Others are working adults, caregivers, or financially independent. They're balancing school

with work, family, and other responsibilities. So policymakers need to move beyond the image of a 19-year-old living in a dorm and design policy that reflects this diversity.

Second, today's students have dealt with a lot of disruption and uncertainty. COVID interrupted their education, and we're still seeing the effects. The student loan and financial aid systems have been chaotic for years. There's declining public confidence in higher ed. And now with AI and other technological shifts, there's even more uncertainty about what skills will be valuable in the future. Students are navigating all of this—and I think policymakers should focus on reducing that uncertainty and supporting them, not adding to the confusion with constant policy changes.

**Emily Rounds:** Thank you. Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Sarah. And to all our listeners: you can learn more about Dr. Reber's work on the Brookings Institution's website. College Completion Day is May 19th and we look forward to celebrating the Class of 2025 and advocating for the support students need to cross the finish line. Thanks again for tuning in.

**Dr. Reber:** Thank you so much for having me.