



## *Astronauts Seek Nationwide Support to Assist College Students*

By Lisa Schott and Curt Brown

College students today are facing unprecedented challenges and hardships. Successful completion of a college degree is never a simple task. Even in an ideal situation, it requires years of dedication and commitment on the part of the student, a wide range of financial and moral support from family, positive interaction with peers, effective guidance from faculty and staff, and student support services offered on campus. The insidious effects of a global pandemic have introduced a degree of difficulty for these young scholars unlike anything before. The good news is there is something we can do about it.

Many families are experiencing significant financial shortfalls, and college tuition can be a luxury they can simply no longer afford. For those who are fortunate enough to be able to pursue a degree, many are finding that every piece of the support network is under threat. Classes have gone on-line, making real-time interactions between students and instructors more challenging. The greatly reduced time spent on campus is limiting peer-to-peer interaction. It is not surprising that so many students are taking “gap years,” reducing their class load, or simply dropping out. The National Student Clearinghouse and many universities and community colleges are reporting freshmen enrollment declines between 10 and 20% this fall.

This is a huge threat to society and our future quality of life. We are missing opportunities to ensure that students are trained with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to the greater good – as a scientist, engineer, teacher, medical professional, or any number of other valuable and essential careers. We must understand the potential consequences of this threat and take action to prevent this from happening.

The web site, [Inside Higher Ed](#), has analyzed data from the “[Understanding America Survey](#)”, a nationwide survey of American parents regarding the impact of COVID on their children’s postsecondary education plans for Fall 2020. Among the many findings, more than one quarter of college students rely on jobs at or near their college to fund tuition, textbooks, and other expenses, and those jobs simply do not exist in the same numbers this fall. Although our colleges and universities are doing everything they can, to meet students and families halfway, more help is needed. We can all help through donations to scholarship programs.

We need more people supporting every type of scholarship out there. America needs leaders in every field doing what they can to help students with one or more of the support pillars necessary to complete those college degrees. This includes every type of degree or training, from STEM to arts to education to nursing to vocational trades and more. Education is the key to innovation in every aspect of life and key to a society that continues to move forward and thrive.



The [Astronaut Scholarship Foundation \(ASF\)](#) is an organization founded and supported by astronauts and industry leaders that has provided scholarships to the best and brightest STEM students since 1986. The founding Mercury 7 astronauts recognized the need more than 30 years ago. In May of this year, the ASF Board of Directors approved an increase in our scholarship amount from \$10,000 to \$15,000 per student and approved our largest class ever with 56 Astronaut Scholars nationwide, studying 22 different fields in STEM. We wanted to send a strong message that it is crucial for students to persevere and complete their degrees, and we want them to know we are behind them and are here to help them achieve their goals.

ASF provides much more than financial support. We also provide a comprehensive range of programs including assigned mentors to every scholar, professional development training, networking among peers as well as industry and educational leaders, facilitation of internships and permanent jobs, and help with our scholars' entrepreneurial endeavors. ASF aims to fill gaps in the support pillars necessary for student success.

Co-author Lisa Schott states that she would not be where she is today without ASF and its personalized support. We need to make sure these best and brightest students can say the same thing, themselves, later in life. It will take ongoing commitment and cooperation of a lot of like-minded people. We CAN do something about it. Give to a scholarship foundation that, through the fog of a global pandemic, still strives for a bright future for our young scholars.

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