

Higher College Costs = Higher Student Debt

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UConn's announcement that it must increase tuition again, largely due to union-negotiated faculty pay increases, reminds us once again that access to higher education just keeps on moving up a steep, slippery slope. UConn also said that tuition would not be increased beyond what had already been announced a couple of years ago. That should be reassuring to parents of UConn students, but clearly higher education just keeps on getting more expensive as state support for higher education has declined, while student loan debts keep on rising.

Some data: While average per person debt declined somewhat during the Great Recession, it is headed up again. According to The College Board, *in inflation-adjusted dollars*, the cost of tuition more than doubled between 1973 and 2013; per student borrowing increased from \$1066 in 1970 to \$6928 in 2012; the number of borrowers more than doubled over the past decade; and 41% of student borrowers who began college in 2003 had at least \$10,000 in educational debt in 2009. (5% had at least \$50,000 in debt.) Even more troubling, 15% of those not enrolled and with no degree had between \$10,000 and \$30,000 in such debt. Lower-income and first generation college students are particularly challenged by the cost of higher education, even community college, and by personal issues that hinder their ability to succeed. At least half of my freshman students at ECSU last fall, where I teach First Year Introduction, listed "finances" as one of their top concerns; and ECSU is a relative bargain at about \$23,000 per year for students living on campus.

Where will it stop? Will President Obama's jawboning colleges and universities, especially the most expensive private ones, to "lower your costs" have any effect? What can students and parents do to reduce the crush of student loans? Is college worth the cost? What's the alternative?

The value question is the easiest to answer. The "average" college graduate makes about \$18,000 more per year than the average high school graduate. But we all know stories of college graduates with "soft" degrees waiting on tables, selling clothes, counting out money at a bank window, struggling to pay off their loans. I have such a young person living, once again, in my house.

In spite of all the headwinds, what can students, parents and counselors do to help students of various backgrounds access and afford higher education? Positive options exist.

Pre-College: College-bound students have for years shortened the time and expense of college by taking Advanced Placement courses in high school; and recently more school systems have been encouraging more challenged students to take these courses and providing additional, out-of-class support. In other states, "dual enrollment" efforts have brought college faculty into high schools to teach college-level courses for college credit, and training selected high school

teachers to teach college-level courses. Just recently, Connecticut announced a partnership among Norwalk High School, Norwalk Community College and IBM to bring selected 9th graders into the new “Pathways in Technology Early College High School” that will allow graduates to emerge with both a high school diploma and Associates college degree. In addition, four of Connecticut’s community colleges have established “Manufacturing Technology Centers” that promise those that complete one or two demanding years a nearly 100% job placement promise. These approaches can save time and money later on and lead to good jobs in high skill, technical and scientific careers.

The Khan Academy, renowned for its easy-to-understand U-Tube tutorials on basic and advanced math and science, and increasingly other subjects (over 3300 on-line and free), has recently added a user-friendly “SAT prep course”, also free, to offset the advantage that many high school students have in taking expensive versions of such test prep that have been a siren song for their largely middle-class parents for decades.

Community and on-line College: While many middle-class parents will continue to see a 4-year college as the goal, more students from diverse backgrounds will seek less expensive options, especially community college, with an average cost for 2 semesters about \$4000 in Connecticut. For others, including many “adult learners”, Charter Oak State College offers the least expensive choice via on-line courses. It does not look like “college” but the end-product can be the same for disciplined students.

Financial aid and debt: Although the ability of colleges and universities to increase financial aid varies dramatically, public and private institutions are exploring all possible means to do this in spite of decreasing state support, and will be under increasing pressure to help students and their families be more creative. Many private colleges and some public institutions have secured foundation and alumni gifts to provide scholarships to needy students. Loans will, however, continue to be essential.

Similarly, discussions are progressing in Washington to index student debt to income and to put a time limit on college debt, and to reduce the “profit” that the Federal Government is earning from student loan interest payments. A related bi-partisan group of senators is discussing changing bankruptcy laws to allow college debts to be written off, like credit card and other debt, in bankruptcy settlements, as undesirable as those are but sometimes necessary when young adults cannot find work that pays enough to cover debt repayment.

Thus, the college access and affordability puzzle will continue to be complicated, and for students without savvy families or counselors, often not affordable, for some to begin and for some when they find they just cannot afford to pursue their dreams. But many people in government, in K-12 education, in higher education, and in community-based agencies are working on and advocating for the kinds of changes outlined above. As a nation, we cannot afford in the long-term to do otherwise. As a state, let us lead.