



Higher education beyond reach

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HIGH TUITION costs are forcing college students to work full-time jobs while taking classes, mortgage their futures with excessive loans, and defer their educations.

The College Board, which tracks financial trends in colleges and universities, has provided numbers to confirm what students and families already understood: the cost of college is handily outpacing inflation.

Much less clear to consumers and public officials is why education costs are continuing to climb so rapidly. Schools need to do a much better job of providing students, parents and the public with a detailed account of how the institutions operate, and how tuition and tax dollars are spent.

The greatest increase last year was at public four-year colleges, where tuition and fees were up 6.6 percent over last year. At private colleges, the increase was 6.3 percent. In contrast, consumer prices increased less than 3 percent.

University administrators contend, with some merit, that the Consumer Price Index is a problematic yardstick for higher education, an employee-intensive enterprise that has been hit hard by increases in health-care and fuel costs. Yet they must remember that they are not alone in facing such increases.

Higher college costs also reflect elevated expectations of students and parents, who are

telling administrations they want modern dormitories and luxurious gymnasiums, along with small class sizes.

Again, transparency is crucial. Administrators must let consumers know what additional amenities cost and how they are being funded. Well-managed university endowments can also play a critical role in helping colleges provide affordable educations.

States and cities are increasingly looking to colleges and universities to solve social problems and act as economic engines. Competition for talented faculty and researchers is intense across the nation.

But talent is expensive, and so are modern laboratories and research facilities. States that expect their universities to remain competitive must maintain an adequate level of public support.

Colleges and governments have a joint responsibility to make higher education as affordable as possible to this generation of young adults. To fail in that role will have dire consequences not only for potential students, but for the nation's social and economic health.

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Editorial