

Facts About College Access and Affordability

A new report to Congress by the Government Accountability Office paints a far different picture of college affordability than the rhetoric on Capitol Hill and in the media would suggest. The report, *Higher Education: Tuition Continues to Rise, But Patterns Vary by Institution Type, Enrollment, and Educational Expenditures*, refutes common misperceptions about college costs.

- Nearly half of all students in 2006-07 attended institutions where the published average annual in-state tuition and fees were less than \$2,550.
- Three out of every five students attended institutions where the published average annual in-state tuition and fees were less than \$4,750 per year.
- Only three out of every 100 students were enrolled at institutions where the average annual tuition and fees were more than \$25,000 per year. And schools with the highest tuitions matched or exceeded their annual tuition increases with spending on education-related expenses of direct benefit to students.

Had the report included information on net tuition price (the amount students actually paid) and the impact of student financial aid, the affordability picture painted by the data would have been even brighter.

Despite the headlines, the wide availability of student aid and choice of institutions means college remains affordable for most Americans. Nearly 20 percent of traditional-aged undergraduates come from families with incomes below \$25,000 per year. The federal government, states, and institutions all offer financial aid to help low-income students afford college. Seven out of 10 full-time students receive some sort of financial aid.

Overall, 44 percent of full-time students face tuition charges less than \$3,000, after grant-aid is awarded, including:

- 42 percent of full time students at public, four-year institutions;
- 90 percent at public, two-year institutions;
- 16 percent at private, four-year institutions; and
- 19 percent at proprietary institutions.

Financial aid is also available for the middle class. A wide variety of aid programs are available to help middle-income families, including many grants and scholarships as well as tax incentives, subsidized loans and benefits related to higher education. At public four-year colleges, students with family incomes between \$40,000 and \$80,000 receive grants averaging \$3,400. At private institutions, grant aid for that income group averages \$9,500.

Colleges and universities put significant and increasing resources into institutional aid.

The fact is, most—if not all—colleges and universities with the largest endowments are *already* providing a substantial amount of aid to students from low- and middle-income families. The average grant at most of these schools covers approximately 80 percent of the cost of tuition and can be used to cover expenses including room and board, books, etc.

There are high-quality, low-cost alternatives available to students and families –community colleges. Community colleges provide a wide range of educational options, all at a low cost to students. In addition to career and technical education, community colleges offer the first two years of academic course work to transfer to a four-year institution. They also help workers upgrade their skills and provide courses for lifelong learning and personal enrichment. Open admissions, nearby locations, a wide array of courses, flexible class schedules, and low tuition prices make community colleges readily accessible to everyone.

This information was compiled with the assistance of the American Council on Education (ACE), the Association of American Universities (AAU), the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), and others. For additional information, please contact Erin A. Hennessy, ACE Office of Public Affairs, at (202) 939-9367 or erin_hennessy@ace.nche.edu.