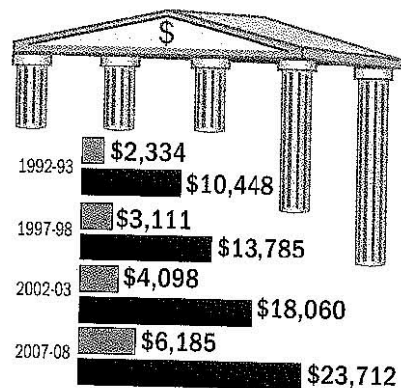


College Affordability: Boola-boola for Yale

But Ivy tuition cuts don't address broader access to higher education.

By Robert W. Ahrens, *USA Today*



Public colleges Private colleges

Expensive educations

Average tuition and fees at four-year colleges have more than doubled in the past 15 years.

Source: The College Board
(amounts not adjusted for inflation)

Not all the news on inflation was bad this week. Yale University announced that it is slashing tuition costs for students from families with financial need, matching a similar move by Harvard a month earlier.

Yale deserves a cheer for addressing the sticker shock that discourages applications from brilliant students who lack trust funds. But it's easy to increase aid when your endowment is \$35 billion (Harvard) or \$22.5 billion (Yale).

The tougher question is what to do about college affordability for the 99.92% of four-year students in the USA who attend institutions other than Harvard and Yale. College costs have been outstripping inflation for years. Average tuition and fees in this school year are \$6,185 at public schools (up from \$3,111 just a decade ago), and \$23,712 at private colleges (up from \$13,785), according to the College Board.

When those sorts of numbers scare young people away from higher education, it's a major problem for both them and the nation. An educated workforce is necessary to compete in the global economy, and even many of today's blue-collar jobs require post-high school training.

The affordability issues are difficult, and they vary between public and private institutions:

If big state schools can deliver top educations at affordable prices, the USA can retain its status as the land of opportunity. But public universities are threatened by the recent state announcements of revenue shortfalls. Most worrisome are states, such as New Hampshire, that already charge relatively high tuition but offer modest aid.

Among private schools, Otterbein College in Ohio is more typical than Harvard or Yale. With its modest \$100 million endowment, the liberal arts college depends heavily on its \$25,000-a-year tuition. Although that price gets discounted for many students, Otterbein President Brent DeVore lacks the option of a dramatic tuition cut. Otterbein and other private colleges depend on the personal touch. The school could raise its 13-to-1 student-faculty ratio, but at what cost to the learning environment?

While affordability questions like these defy easy answers, some steps can be taken.

The federal government can play a role by increasing tuition tax credits and boosting the value of grants that send poor students to college, assuming that offsetting cuts or revenue can be found elsewhere.

Colleges themselves can move faster to cut costs. Collaborating with nearby schools on course offerings, and refusing to join bidding wars for star professors, would help. So would cutting back on professors' esoteric research and raising their classroom hours.

Perhaps the best weapon for controlling college costs is turning students and parents into more informed consumers. Armed with more data about student satisfaction, dropout rates, post-graduate employment and gains in skills, families would be better able to determine whether a selective private college is any better than a nearby, more affordable state school.

There's nothing like a little competition to hold down costs. Just ask Harvard and Yale.

Opposing view: Elite schools drive costs
When Harvard, Yale cut tuition, students elsewhere pay the price.

William G. Durden and Robert J. Massa

Harvard and Yale recently have made pronouncements regarding increased middle-class affordability and access. It is well within their rights to do as they wish, but their decisions could increase costs for the thousands of universities without huge endowments, drive up the tuition price, and reduce access for low- and middle-income students.

Exchanging student loans for grants inflates cost. The “free” grant money must come from somewhere. If one has a large endowment, it comes from taking a greater percentage as payout, leaving the tuition price unchanged. If one has a smaller endowment, or is state- and taxpayer-supported, it is likely to come from tuition increases.

Targeting more grants to upper-income students without a change in how financial aid is determined will also inflate costs. Many colleges, which cannot afford to ignore tuition revenue, will be forced to increase discounts to compete for students. These schools will either have to cut program quality to reduce costs or increase tuition price to fund additional grants. These inflated tuition prices also could force more students into public colleges at a higher cost to taxpayers.

The negative effects of these policies will further be felt as students who cannot get into super-selective universities have their expectations raised regarding a loan-free aid package. When the college to which they apply cannot offer such a package, low-income students might opt out of higher education altogether rather than take out a loan, which they have now been told is “bad.”

The elimination of loans by wealthy schools will increase the tuition price students pay “systemwide,” not decrease it. Current financial aid formulas are imperfect and expect far more from upper-middle income families than they can afford. Harvard, Yale and other megarich universities should not, however, act unilaterally to “fix” this problem. They are acting because they can afford to do so — not because it is right.

They should be leading a national discussion on reforming the way parent contributions are determined. Flawed policy disguised as affordability and access will do more harm than good, and when Harvard and Yale do it, it has credibility beyond what it deserves.

William G. Durden is president of Dickinson College; Robert J. Massa is Dickinson's vice president for enrollment and college relations.

- 1** In a sentence or two, summarize the main argument in each editorial. Which do you find more compelling? Why?
- 2** Examine the supporting evidence used in each editorial. What examples or information do you find especially persuasive (or unpersuasive)? How does the bar graph in the first editorial contribute to its overall argument? Does the graph make the first editorial seem more persuasive?
- 3** What are some reasons that *USA Today* and other newspapers might print opposing editorials alongside each other? Why might the pro-con format appeal to readers? How do you approach texts that offer opposing interpretations of an issue?