The private burden of public colleges

By Catherine Rampell

NO MU MENTION

Climbing walls, Jacuzzis, exotic chefs. There are lots of (misguided) explanations for skyrocketing tuition costs at public colleges and universities, which educate about three-quarters of America’s postsecondary students.

Of course, very few schools actually offer any of these country-club-like amenities, despite the attention and mockery they’ve earned in the press. So on to the latest scapegoat: greedy executives, or so suggests the coverage of two recent reports about highly paid college presidents. Their outsize compensation is supposedly yet another sign of bloated, bureaucratic colleges’ inability to control runaway spending.

You can definitely debate whether public institutions are spending on the right things (including compensation for both executive and athletic personnel; in most states, the highest-paid public employee is a college athletic coach). But these days it’s hard to complain that public colleges are spending too much overall, or even that their spending is rising. Total spending per student at public schools has actually stayed about flat over the past decade, once you control for inflation.

So why, then, is tuition climbing so quickly at public schools?

The biggest driver isn’t lavish rec centers or fat-cat presidents or overstaffed career counseling centers. It’s politicians: State legislators have shifted the burden of paying for college away from taxpayers and onto the shoulders of students. Public colleges have gone from being “state-funded” to “state-supported,” and now, finally, just “state-located,” as one university president quipped.

Over the past five years, educational appropriations per full-time-equivalent student have fallen by nearly a quarter, according to a recent State Higher Education Executive Officers report. Faced with declining public subsidies, schools have been forced to raise tuition dramatically. Even those tuition hikes, though, have not fully offset public funding cuts: Appropriations have fallen by about $1,800 per student over that time, while net tuition revenues have increased by “only” $1,100. Schools have dealt with the funding shortfalls by different means, including increasing class sizes; shifting more of their teaching loads onto poorly paid adjuncts; deferring maintenance and repairs; and, in some cases, restricting enrollment in the disciplines that are most expensive to teach (even though disciplines that are resource-intensive, such as nursing,
often happen to be the ones that offer better job prospects). Some of these changes, you’ll note, suggest that students are paying more but getting less. (The same may not be true of private schools, which are also raising tuition sharply but adding lots of staff.)

State legislators have been paring back higher ed funding for a few reasons. One is obviously the financial crisis, which led to steep drops in tax revenues. But the declines in college subsidies are actually part of a trend that long predates the Great Recession.

Over time, mandatory spending on things like prisons, pensions and health care has crowded out discretionary funding for higher ed, even as college enrollment has swelled and as postsecondary credentials have become an increasingly common prerequisite for getting a job.

“If you’re a state legislator, you look at all your state’s programs and you say, ‘Well, we can’t make prisoners pay, but we can make college students pay,’” Ronald Ehrenberg, the director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute and a trustee of the State University of New York System, once told me in an interview.

State budget cuts also seem to reflect changing public attitudes toward higher education.

From the days of Benjamin Franklin, through the foundation of land-grant colleges during the Civil War, and then up until quite recently, higher education (just like primary or secondary education) was seen as a sort of public good: a service whose benefits were shared among the entire population and whose costs should therefore be borne by the entire population.

This makes sense. Yes, most of the perks of higher ed likely accrue to the individual who gets the degree. But college-going also has huge spillover effects for the rest of the economy. Research by Enrico Moretti, an economist at the University of California at Berkeley, shows that having a greater density of college grads raises everyone’s wages — especially, in fact, the wages of workers without degrees. College is also one of the best tools we have for promoting upward economic mobility among the poor, as research by Pew’s Economic Mobility Project has demonstrated.

Which is exactly why shifting the burden of college costs away from taxpayers and onto students is so shortsighted. It means that attending college, or more important, the prospect of actually graduating, is stretching further out of the reach of the workers who need to upgrade their skills most — and whose skills the country’s future depends on.
How American Universities Turned Into Corporations

by Taboolaby Taboola

College graduation season is here, and that means students should be celebrating their hard-earned educations. But have you seen the headlines being made by many of our nation’s campuses lately?

On Monday, you could read about a new study of public universities showing that schools with the highest presidential salaries also had the fastest-growing student debt. That same night, Senator Elizabeth Warren was on the Colbert Report to bring attention to the nation’s student loan debt, which now exceeds $1 trillion. And over the weekend, New York University was the subject of a New York Times investigation detailing inhumane working conditions at its far-flung Abu Dhabi campus, the crown jewel in president John Sexton’s octopus-like plan to grow the university throughout New York City’s Greenwich Village and across the globe.

At their core, these stories reflect a fundamental change in higher education: universities act increasingly like big businesses that treat students as customers.

This transformation is part of a larger cultural shift that can be traced back to the 1970s and ‘80s, when policymakers began to view higher education more as a private good (benefitting individual students) than as a public good (helping the nation prosper by creating better educated citizens). In previous decades, public universities enjoyed robust support from state and federal government, and tuition at some of the country’s best universities was free or nearly free. But Republican governors like Ronald Reagan argued that states should not subsidize intellectual curiosity, while economists like Milton Friedman advocated against the notion of free education, claiming that students seeking a private advantage should pay for it themselves. Just take the example of the University of California at Berkeley, in Reagan’s home state: in 1960, tuition was free for a California resident; today it costs $12,872 with an additional $14,414 for room and board.

But how did policymakers envision that students would pay for that private good? Through student loans, of course. Under the theory that student debt was “good debt,” student lending limits rose during Reagan’s presidency, and a profitable student loan market emerged. This in
turn fueled the rise in college tuition, as universities sought to capture the student loan dollar through increasing fees. In fact, since 1978 the cost of college has increased in absolute dollars by 1120%. All the while, universities have worked to convince students that their institutions are the most worthy of skyrocketing fees, perpetuating a cost disease at the root of higher education.

Flash back to 1636, when Harvard, the first American college, was founded. Clayton Christensen, a Harvard professor of Business Administration, argues that Harvard established the DNA of American higher education on the basis of constant improvement and expansion—seeking better academic programs, better facilities, better professors, better students. As this DNA replicated over the following centuries in colleges and universities across the country, it created a business model that Christensen describes as “massive in its scope”—one that must provide for research, instruction and a complex set of academic, athletic and leisure facilities, dormitories and dining halls. “That’s a tough game to keep playing,” Christensen says. For a university to compete with its peer institutions, it must engage in the arms race to expand operations, thus increasing its cost base. If, for instance, Stanford builds a new science lab to attract a star professor, Princeton will likely build a lab of equal or better quality to attract another star professor. And if NYU is going to invest in a global campus in Abu Dhabi, then Yale might just have to follow suit by building a campus in Singapore.

This competition for prestige has been further entrenched in the university DNA by numerous college rankings. While many parents look to the U.S. News and World Report, which relies on a complex variety of metrics, including research expenditure, admission rates and peer assessment, you can now find rankings in the Princeton Review on just about anything, from best library to best campus food.

This desire for constant improvement could in theory be all well and good, so long as the astronomical cost of the enhancements were not getting passed on to students. But given the recent disinvestment in higher education by the states and increase in student loans, young people and their families are left footing the bill. In the process, universities’ attempt to serve their academic mission is being perverted into an effort to attract students as consumers. Step onto a college campus today, and for every new science lab or classroom, you will likely find a new student recreation center, football stadium or luxury dormitory with swimming pools nearby. And, too often, those amenities designed to attract 17 and 18 year olds are being built with money the universities don’t actually have, leading the schools to take on debt themselves. The ranks of well-paid administrators have swelled as well, far outpacing the growth of full-time faculty, who are being replaced by low-paid adjunct professors.

As universities succumb to this cost disease, they begin to resemble businesses more than nonprofit schools charged with a public mission. The future of higher learning and, more broadly, our society hangs in the balance. If there’s any inspiration we can glean from the recent headlines, it’s that the laundry list of problems demanding solutions is becoming clearer. But it will be harder for us to effect change if we are unable to understand the broader cultural problem at play in the corporatization of the university.

Additional research and writing contributed by Andrew P. Coffman.
College education is the big driver in income gap

9 HOURS AGO • BY JIM TANKERSLEY WASHINGTON POST

NO MENTION

One of the striking stories in the American economy over the last several decades is just how much the incomes of the super-rich have grown, compared with the incomes of everyone else.

But the focus on those super-rich — the top 1 percent of all earners — has overshadowed a larger, more troubling gap: the widening one between college graduates and workers whose education stopped after high school.

That’s the argument MIT economist David Autor makes in a brief research paper released Thursday — that “the growth of skill differentials among the ‘other 99 percent’ is arguably even more consequential than the rise of the 1% for the welfare of most citizens.”

By Autor’s calculations, if you take all the income gains that flowed to the 1 percent over the last 35 years and redistribute them evenly to everyone else in the economy, that would deliver an extra $7,100 a year to every household in the bottom 99 percent. That’s a lot of money. But it’s not as much as the growing pay differential between workers who went to college and those who didn’t.

In the last 35 years, he calculates, the so-called college premium — the boost in your paycheck from earning a diploma — increased by $28,000, adjusted for inflation.

So if you took that entire increase and redistributed it to noncollege workers, you’d be giving them a raise four times the size of the 1 percent redistribution.

As he described it in an interview: “Imagine two people, average people, four people who go to the same high school, two men, two women. One of the men and one of the women decide to go to college, and one of the men and one of the women decide to call it off in high school. Let’s say that happens in 1979 ... At the time, they could have expected the college graduate family would earn about $30,000 more a year than the high school...
grad family. ... Now, roll the tape forward 23, 24 years, and that annual gap has expanded from $30,000 to $58,000. So, almost doubled. So what might have looked reasonable in 1979 now looks like a bad bet.”

Contrasting that increase with the growing income share of the 1 percent isn’t exactly apples to apples. But Autor says it should be sufficient to challenge Americans’ perceptions of inequality — and push policymakers toward more efforts to lift lower-skill workers up.

“I don’t mean to say the 1 percent thing is not a big deal. It is,” he said. But the “real reason to worry about inequality,” he added, is “because of the falling bottom.”

Autor has spent much of his career tracking the forces that have hurt workers and incomes at the bottom, most notably outsourcing and automation trends that have reduced the value of physical labor and increased the value of brainpower. (He notes that workers have also suffered because of steadily reduced power to bargain for better wages.)

Workers have been relatively slow to catch on, he says — but there’s hope.

“Prior cohorts of U.S. students, particularly males, were slow to react to the rising return to education during the 1980s and 1990s,” he writes in the paper, “but the message appears to have finally gotten through. During the first decade of the 21st century, the U.S. high school graduation rate rose sharply after having been essentially stagnant since the late 1960s. This unanticipated rise was followed just a few years later by a surge in college completions.”

Once that surge began, he notes, the college premium stopped going up.

**Mental Health and the Role of the Campus**

May 22, 2014 - 9:07pm

BY Deanna England

NO MENTION

I recently asked my fellow University of Venus writers what resources they had on campus to support students in terms of their mental well-being. It seems that all I’ve been reading about
lately is how mental illness is on the rise in Academia, along with discussions on how to take care of yourself and how, when and where to ask for help.

My question in this post focuses on the “where.” I recently read an article discussing a student at Yale University who was threatened with expulsion because of her weight – her slight physique signalled an eating disorder, and their “concern” resulted in what sounded like a form of harassment, and their advice and monitoring of her food intake almost resulted in the disorder they were so afraid of. My own institution was also recently in the news due to our low student-to-counsellor ratio. Increasingly, institutions are implementing “student at risk” protocols to address behaviours and warning signs of students with the potential to cause harm to others or themselves. There are some strong views on what the roles and responsibilities of the University should be to address this growing concern.

As someone who struggled with anxiety while completing my master’s degree, as well as simultaneously acting in an administrative role for students and programs, I can appreciate the complexities from both perspectives. I found completing my degree to be exhausting, isolating and damaging to my ego and spirit. It also opened up a myriad of opportunities for me, enriched my life, and profoundly changed my world view.

But what exactly was the role of my professors, administrators and the Student Services Department in terms of monitoring how I was actually coping with my program? Student-at-risk protocols, Counselling Services, Department Program Committees and even the Provincial Government all intersect to provide an environment that regulates the amount of work, evaluation structures, tuition fees and support resources provided to, and imposed on students.

During the course of my degree, I began to see a therapist, was prescribed anxiety medication and was consistently applying for tuition supplements from the institution after each course. I battled my depression, occasionally had financial concerns, and of course struggled to find the time to complete my assignments while working full-time and doing mundane tasks like laundry, seeing family and trying to sustain a relationship.

The expectation in some of the programs and protocols that Universities are launching is that someone is going to *notice* that students are in crisis. Now at the graduate level, I was fortunate to have an advisor, and the classes were very small. However, in an undergraduate course of 100+ students, will a faculty member necessarily notice that a student is struggling? And will they necessarily know what to do about it if they do? These programs require training on multiple levels; is it useful to have a number of counsellors equipped with strategies and policies at their fingertips if faculty members or administrators at my level don’t know what to look for in their brief student interactions?

I have had students crying in my office, as I imagine many faculty and staff members have. However, I can’t always discern whether I am witnessing a moment of frustration, or a deep-rooted cause for concern. And therein lay the gap. We are expected to look after our students, students who are independent adults. The line between showing concern and appearing punitive is a fine one. Yale was demonstrating some laudable care with the student mentioned above, and if she was genuinely ill, they likely would have felt the ramifications of ignoring the warning
signs. I guarantee though, not one of my instructors knew that I was in crisis during my degree, as I certainly didn’t feel I was in a position to demonstrate what I feared would be construed as “weakness” to people who were both my instructors and co-workers. How many other students find themselves disguising their struggles due to a still existing stigma?

Universities often try to be one-stop-shops. I’ve seen campuses with hairdressers, banks, doctors, lawyers, grocery stores and more. But the mandate of a University is to educate, and I would argue that one is not only there to learn how to cure White Nose Syndrome, but also to become more resourceful individuals – and if our sorely overtaxed Counselling Services are only able to offer a referral, then perhaps that is the wiser path. But where does that leave the students who need our help?

True armyworms making annual migration through Missouri

Thursday, May 22, 2014 | 11:47 a.m. CDT
BY JOSH BENSON

COLUMBIA — True armyworms have begun their seasonal march through southern Missouri and are expected to move northward as the year progresses, said Wayne Bailey, an MU Extension associate professor of entomology. This could potentially be bad news for local farmers who are growing corn, wheat or fescue, a type of grass crop.

True armyworms migrate with the assistance of strong winds and storm systems, which carry them from southwestern portions of the country into more northeastern regions. They usually arrive in Missouri during the first week of April and supplement the resident population, Bailey said.

First generation larvae cause the most crop damage in May and June. They primarily target wheat and fescue, but also might feed on corn and grain sorghum. True armyworms can defoliate and destroy entire fields, Bailey said. "If there are enough of them, they can eat all the foliage," he said.

These unwanted pests operate in cyclical patterns, with major outbreaks occurring once every four to five years. The larger outbreaks are known as economic infestations; the
last one took place in 2009. That year, true armyworms swarmed fields, ravaged crops and even caused the cancellation of a Royals game, Bailey said.

True armyworms have already been confirmed in both Ozark and Douglas counties in southern Missouri, said Jill Scheidt, an MU Extension agronomy specialist. A crop consultant also reported an infestation in Golden City.

Bailey recommends scouting crops for infestation during early morning or late evening hours. Typically, true armyworm larvae are inactive during the day and tend to feed at night. Bailey also urges farmers to check their crops several times a week, from top to bottom.

Infestations reach threshold levels when at least four true armyworms are found per square foot or when at least 2 percent of crop heads have been clipped by farmers, Scheidt said. When threshold levels are reached, there are two suggested courses of action: spraying insecticides or harvesting early, Bailey said.

True armyworms can wreak havoc on farming operations. About 2006 or 2007, an infestation hit north-central Missouri and ate all the fescue in 12 counties, Bailey said.

This year, however, might not bring such a major outbreak.

"It's not near as bad as what we've seen in the past," said Stacy Hambelton, MU Extension agriculture business specialist.

Hambelton farms in Ozark County and once found true armyworms in his fescue. They ranged in size from a quarter-of-an-inch to an inch, he said.

"You could tell they had eaten a bit," he said. But, fortunately for Hambelton, infestation threshold levels were not reached.

Hambelton only knows of one farmer who has been forced to spray insecticides so far this year. The problem, he said, is that true armyworms are unpredictable and their distribution has no set pattern from year to year. You may have one person with severe damage and another person half-a-mile away with none, he said.

Bailey remained cautious about this year, however. We're about due for a major outbreak, he said.