

Report: Most states flunk in college affordability

(AP) -- A new, independent report on higher education flunks most states when it comes to affordability. It gives better but still mixed grades in other areas, such as college participation and completion rates.

The biennial study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education evaluates how well higher education is serving the public -- and leaves little doubt where the system is failing. Forty-three states received "F"s for affordability, up from 36 two years ago. The others got "D"s, except Utah and California, both of which eked out a "C."

The report card uses a range of measurements to give states grades, from "A" to "F," on the performance of their public and private colleges. The affordability grade is based on how much of the average family's income it costs to go to college.

Almost everywhere, that figure is up -- even accounting for financial aid, which has risen, but not as fast as tuition. In Ohio, public four-year colleges cost 42 percent of the average family's paycheck, up from 28 percent in the early 1990s. In New Jersey, costs have risen from 24 percent to 37 percent and in Oregon from 25 percent to 36 percent.

"It's amazing," said Jack Partridge, a Columbus, Ohio, gas company executive who recently moved four daughters -- a sophomore and freshman triplets -- into their dorms at Miami University of Ohio. In-state tuition plus room and board run about \$20,000 this year at the public school.

"I saw those annual increases and had tried to put a little bit away for each of them, but I'm nowhere near going to cover four years," he said.

And that doesn't include the extras.

"All of a sudden I had to buy almost \$6,000 worth of computers a while ago, then the books," he said. "I just try to keep a sense of humor about it."

Aid not keeping pace

The report card notes that increases in state and federal aid, though substantial, haven't kept up with demand and prices. The study -- along with a separate report published last week by the Education Trust, a Washington think-tank -- also says colleges aren't doing enough to help the neediest students.

Colleges' own funds, which comprise the largest portion of financial aid, are increasingly being used to lure high-achieving students who boost a school's reputation -- but who don't need help to go to college.

"There's been a sea change in the last decade-and-a-half over how (colleges) spend their money," said National Center president Patrick Callan. "It used to be about giving students opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have. Now it's about giving them money to go to one college instead of another."

The two studies, analyzing the same federal data in slightly different ways, both illustrate the trend.

The report card finds colleges awarded grants to 36 percent of their students from families earning \$20,000 per year or less. Those grants averaged \$4,700. But wealthier students received comparable attention.

The colleges gave grant aid to 29 percent from families earning \$100,000 or more. And those grants were even higher on average: \$6,200.

The Education Trust study looked at all students, not just those receiving aid, and found the average student from the wealthiest families gets nearly as much grant aid as the average student from the poorest.

"Educational opportunity, in other words, is taking a back seat to institutional prestige," Education Trust director Kati Haycock said.

The trend undermines colleges' argument that the government should spend more to help low-income students, Callan said.

"It's very difficult for colleges to come into Congress or state legislatures and say, 'We want to spend our money to get our U.S. News ratings up, but you have a responsibility to help poor kids,'" he said.

Higher marks for enrollment, preparation

The report card paints a better, though still mixed, picture of how successful the states are in getting students to enroll in college and then -- just as important -- getting them through with a degree.

Half the states received "A"s or "B"s for student preparation, considering measurements such as math assessment and Advanced Placement scores. Only Louisiana and New Mexico got "F"s. Most states also got "A"s or "B"s in degree completion.

Seventeen states got "A"s for participation. But large racial gaps persist. In Colorado 40 percent of white 18-to-24 year-olds are enrolled, but just 17 percent of nonwhites. In New Jersey, 47 percent of whites that age are in college but just 27 percent of nonwhites.

Partridge, the Ohio parent, said he's concerned about affordability, both as a father and a businessman on the state chamber of commerce.

"We're losing young people. They're going out of state," he said. "I'm concerned and I think the state needs to look at it. I don't know how some families do it."

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