

From 3 university presidents: Here's how to make college more affordable

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By **Guest Editorial**

By **Jill Tiefenthaler, Eric J. Barron and Reynold Verret**

Editor's Note: When it comes to the cost of higher education in the U.S., signs of trouble abound. For instance, states now rely more heavily on tuition to finance their public colleges and universities than on government funding.

Private colleges and universities are also struggling to make ends meet, steering a record amount of tuition revenue toward grant aid for economically needy students. Meanwhile, the number of student borrowers who defaulted on their student loans edged up last year as did the price of higher education itself.

So The Conversation asked a panel of presidents - from Xavier University of Louisiana, Colorado College and Penn State: Given this reality, what are the top two or three things that you believe need to happen to make college more affordable - particularly for low-income students, students of color and the working class?

More than one funder has to step up

Jill Tiefenthaler, President of Colorado College



Jill Tiefenthaler, president of Colorado College. [Colorado College](#), Author provided

A college education has many funders. Federal and state governments provide support, as do the institutions of higher education themselves. And then, of course, there is the money paid by the students' families. Improving access will require additional support from one or more of these sources. To start at the local level, an increase in state funding would make college more affordable. After all [over 70 percent of all undergraduates](#) attend public institutions, and historically, states have been the primary source of funding for both two- and four-year public institutions.

However, states have [reduced their support in recent years](#) and, as a result, the burden has fallen on students and their families. The "free college" plans in New York and a [few other states](#) are examples of commitments to improve access. However, given the pressure on budgets resulting from underfunded pensions, Medicaid and K-12, I am not optimistic that students can count on increased support from states. In addition, [recent tax changes](#) that limit federal deductions for state taxes will increase pressure to keep state income and property tax rates down, further hindering state funding. Additional support from the federal government, by increasing the [Pell Grant](#) program, could make a big difference. The maximum Pell Grant for the 2018-19 academic year is \$6,095. This is sufficient to cover the annual tuition at most community colleges. For example, the average tuition at [the community college in my city](#) is \$4,651. However, only students with family incomes of less than \$60,000 qualify and the amount of the grant declines significantly as family income increases. Increasing the income cut-off and providing the full \$6,095 to all who qualify would make college much more accessible for low- and middle-income students.

Private nonprofit colleges and universities educate [about 20 percent of all undergraduates](#). The "sticker price" at these institutions gives the impression that they are not accessible to low- and middle-income students. However, privates provide significant institutional aid.

The major source of this support is philanthropy, made up of earnings on endowments and annual gifts. Private institutions with smaller endowments also provide aid from tuition revenue by using the revenue from some students to provide financial aid to other students. However, increasing institutional aid by using tuition revenue is not sustainable. Therefore, the key to making private institutions more affordable is increasing endowments through philanthropy. Although it is true that the new "[endowment tax](#)" on large endowments and any changes to the tax deduction for charitable giving reduce the funds available for financial aid. In addition, private institutions could reduce "merit

aid" - aid that is awarded on the basis of academic, athletic or artistic merit - and reallocate those funds to need-based financial aid.

Of course, [some may argue](#) that rather than finding new sources of revenue, colleges could simply cut their costs and reduce tuition. This would make college more affordable but it would also reduce the quality of the education provided.

Higher education is a very competitive market, and students and their families demand quality - as they should. We must do our best to educate students in a global environment, keeping pace with technological innovations, teaching critical thinking, fostering comfort with ambiguity, and graduating nimble leaders who will thrive in a rapidly changing era.

What needs discussing is the total cost of a degree

Eric Barron, President of Pennsylvania State University



Eric Barron, president of The Pennsylvania State University. [The Pennsylvania State University](#), Author provided

The high level of tuition in U.S. universities can be blamed on many factors. On top of [shrinking state appropriations](#) there are more technology-intensive degrees in every field; an [aging campus infrastructure](#); a sharp increase in compliance and [regulations](#) reporting; and soaring health care costs. University administrators should be deeply concerned that our price is limiting access to an education that enables upward mobility. Interestingly, the conversation on access and affordability seems to be fixated on controlling, first and foremost, the increase in tuition. We need to broaden the framing of this discussion considerably.

The first step is to change the conversation to one of the total cost of a degree. The simple fact is that timely completion of a degree is a critical mechanism to control total cost. A tuition increase pales in comparison to going to school for another year.

The second step is to recognize that the only thing worse than going five and six years in order to graduate, is to accumulate debt and drop out before graduation.

Universities like Penn State are justifiably proud of their [high graduation rates](#). However, when you dig deeper, you discover that first-generation, need-based students have [a dramatically lower graduation rate](#) than most of their peers. At Penn State, they graduate 22 percentage points below the average. We can point to many factors that cause [this graduation gap], but it's clearly not due to lack of ambition.

Sixty-two percent of these students work an average of 22 hours a week, usually at minimum wage jobs, so they can't take a full credit load. It is impossible to graduate in four years. They drop classes more frequently than other students and tend to have lower grades because of their work load. Sadly, they also don't have time to participate in advantageous activities, such as research or internships. They get discouraged. They either give up or end up attending a fifth or sixth year at a significant cost. If they graduate, they have paid more and gotten less from the experience than other students. Our universities need a laser-like focus on mitigating all factors that slow the time to the completion of a degree. Every student should have access to financial literacy advisers and tools that help students take the most cost-efficient way to achieve a degree. We need "completion" programs to be a priority and not allow students to slip away because of finances or other hardships. We can serve our mission of upward mobility and save students millions in costs and debt if we help every student, regardless of financial capability, to graduate, and graduate on time.

The importance of pre-collegiate preparation

Reynold Verret, President of Xavier University of Louisiana



Reynold Verret, president of Xavier University of Louisiana. [Xavier University](#). Author provided

By 2020, nearly [two-thirds](#) of jobs will require postsecondary education. Yet, fewer than [45 percent of adult Americans](#) currently have earned an associate degree or higher, as reported in national data. The cost of higher education and its impact on access and opportunity is a major barrier to more students earning degrees. Talent and ability are not relegated to those of higher means. Our present challenge is to assure education and opportunity for students from all backgrounds. Sadly, we as a nation have been comfortable with very good schools for the haves and less than good ones for the have-nots.

On the federal level, [Pell awards](#) should be increased and eligibility expanded for students with the greatest need. Pell awards should also be allowed to continue to apply during the summer terms so that students persist and graduate on time.

On average, an American student takes 5.1 years to earn the bachelor's degree. [Time to degree completion](#) has increased over the past decades due to a number of factors, such as the need to work and inadequate pre-collegiate schooling. Each extra year increases the cost of the bachelor's degree by 25 percent. The time it takes to earn a bachelor's degree could be reduced if students didn't have to take courses to acquire math and language skills that are normally mastered in high school.

Bold steps are needed. This includes building an equitable K-12 educational pipeline that provides better college readiness for all of America's students. Quality K-12 requires great teachers who remain in the profession and teach in schools with the greatest need.

The teaching profession must be elevated and the nation's best students should be encouraged to become teachers. For their service, school loans should be forgiven or repaid. Colleges and universities should also create postsecondary certificates and credentials meeting the needs of students entering careers that do not require college degrees.

The [HBCU](#) where I serve as president, Xavier University of Louisiana, has been leading the nation in educating [African-Americans who go on to achieve medical degrees](#).

The school also excels in preparing students who achieve Ph.D.s in the STEM fields. A 2017 study has ranked the university [6th in the nation](#) for social mobility, whereby students from the lower 40 percent of the U.S. income distribution enter the upper 40 percent. Our success and the [success of other HBCUs](#) should dispel any notion that talent is associated with socioeconomic status.

The education of our citizens is not only an individual but a collective benefit: America thrives if it develops all of its talent.

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