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The Books Hit Back



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Graphic by Peyton Cabaniss.

A moment that brings tears, excitement—and terror. The moment your child opens an acceptance letter to his or her dream school. After a collective sigh of relief and celebration, life seems smooth sailing. Well, until the inevitable tuition bill enters the inbox.

In the United States, the average cost of college has been rising for half a century, reaching its peak about thirty years ago. This trend has become a way of life as the dollar bill changes in value, but the one question remains: *Why is college so expensive?*

The Beginning of the Trend

While there are a number of factors that have contributed to this trend, the simple answer is that with more students enrolling in universities each year college campuses are becoming strained. A few decades after the baby boomer generation finished their undergraduate studies, colleges experienced a drastic cut of state funding. As a result of the political climate and inflation, there was a deficit in college funding, despite the demand for higher education growing. As employers became more selective in hiring opportunities—requiring more than a high school education—students were pressured to earn a college degree to stay afloat. Thus, when the demand for higher education rose, the cost of maintaining these institutions was becoming more difficult. For many colleges, therefore, raising tuition rates serve to maintain existing resources, not necessarily to dry out bank accounts.

Along with these external factors, colleges are constantly in competition to be the best. Whether it is for promotion or resources, top schools, such as those in the Ivy League, try to distinguish themselves from the rest by reducing their acceptance rates, but this comes with a hefty price tag for students. Because of their exclusivity, however, they can raise the tuition rates since they are aware that student will continue to apply—and, eventually, attend.

In addition to tuition, students pay roughly around \$12,000-\$15,000 a school year for housing and dining. This drives many students to search for alternative methods, such as living off-campus. “Just by living off campus, I have saved much more money than paying for on-campus housing,” said first-year government student Edwin Morales. “With the money I save, I pay for my tuition, and this allows me to save even more instead of taking out loans. Not only is an apartment cheaper, but it is more comfortable.” For others, the alternative is studying abroad. At the University of Texas, roughly 36% of students study abroad. In Europe alone, tuition rates are significantly lower than in the United States. Thus, the price of paying for an experience abroad can sometimes amount to the same as staying local. This shows that the United States’ college rates are not only inflated compared to those across the Atlantic but also that the US economic structure differs. In Europe, there is a guarantee of government subsidies that supplements the need for tuition. Because of this, colleges do not rely on the profit made from tuition to function, so they can keep educational rates lower.

How This Effects the American College Student

For students, tuition is not the only expense to worry about. After meticulously choosing classes and avoiding “that professor,” students then have to face the next dreaded faze: the additional academic costs. With books ranging from \$20 to \$70 and technological resources, such as iClickers, Reef, and TopHat continuing to add to the list. “The Reef software cost me, but I had to get it eventually... I guess,” said second-year student Prisma Sanchez. Whether they are apps or books, expenses are no stranger to college students, but rather than allowing this to ruin one’s college experience, it can be looked upon as an investment into one’s future.

Emptying wallets is inevitable in college, but it is not necessarily wasted money. To Professor Kris Wilson, the Associate Director and Senior Lecturer of the School of

Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, “I have my students pay for a subscription to the *New York Times* to support good journalism. Fewer people are buying newspapers, so I want to help keep the media alive by giving them business.” Although the expenses add up, students do not have to be discouraged. Thanks to websites like Chegg and Amazon, students can look for cheaper alternatives as opposed to buying full price items. Along with this, colleges are working with businesses like the *New York Times* to create student discounts and free access to software. This can give students *some* control over what may seem like never ending costs.

The Worth

Today, college is more than a degree; it’s a key to unlimited opportunities, but like every opportunity, there is a cost. While expenses continue to rise though, people are becoming more aware and are advocating for change. In the meantime, colleges will continue to educate a growing student population.

Although college hurts people’s bank accounts, the rewards are worth it—even when those tuition bills inundate the inbox.



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