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Tuition Documentary

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Tuition Documentary
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Higher education tuition has become an incredibly hot topic, and for good reason.

Since 1978, the cost of the average college tuition increased by 1,120 percent, while the consumer price index rose by only approximately 300 percent. (*Census*, Bureau of Labor Statistics). In this same time, the cost of healthcare and housing, expenses exponentially more highly emphasized in the media and popular culture, rose by 601 percent and approximately 350 percent, respectively. Something is obviously wrong, and it is becoming increasingly clear that, soon, the “education bubble,” if you will—as quite recently did the housing bubble—will burst.

The author chose to investigate why exactly this gargantuan increase is taking place. Given that, nationally, 73 percent of students attend public universities, and 73 percent (and, in some states, even up to 96%) of college students attend schools in their own state, while only 16 percent attend private nonprofit colleges and universities (*Almanac*, The Chronicle of Higher Education), he decided to situate the bulk of his research in public higher education—given the numerous dissimilarities in its financial inner-working vis-à-vis private higher education. Ergo, he chose to employ his own school, the University of Kentucky, as a case study, a microcosm for what is happening on the national level. At the University of Kentucky, for instance—the largest land-grant and public university in the state—tuition has become an exorbitant concern for students. Between 1986 and 2009, tuition increased by 625 percent (*Kentucky Public Colleges and Universities – Full-Time Undergraduate Resident Tuition and Fees*, Kentucky Council of Postsecondary Education). The University of Kentucky, then, approximately models what is happening to tuition on a national level. The author interviewed and spoke with myriad students,

and virtually all expressed the same concerns at their increasing inability to afford their education. At the same moment, nevertheless, little to none knew, or at least claimed to know, why exactly tuition is augmenting so rapidly.

With the preponderance of discussion of the topic in popular media much more partisan and ideological than empirical in nature, the author decided that, as both a student and a documentary filmmaker, he would engage in a film-as-research project, a feature-length documentary, in a mission to find definite answers. This documentary, titled *Tuition*, explores what many consider an absolute predicament in our nation in the constant growth of college tuition, and in the correspondingly augmenting burden on less economically-privileged individuals (the number of which is also rapidly growing). As Senator Tom Harkin, chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, stated, “Soaring tuition and shrinking incomes are making college less and less affordable. For millions of young people, rising college costs are putting the American dream on hold, or out of reach.” The film explores what exactly is happening in contemporary colleges; why it is happening; the profound effects it has had, currently has, and will have on our society, economy, and culture; and potential solutions, to allay ever-rising costs and ever-increasing educational disparities.

What exactly is happening has, albeit very succinctly, been explored. Why, then, is it happening? Mixed messages abound. On one news station, one hears government budget cuts are the main reason; on another, one hears students’ expectations are too high; on yet another, one hears that there are simply too many students. The first of these, however, is arguably the most prominent: government cuts. Both the current and previous presidents of the University of Kentucky, for instance, Doctors Eli Capilouto and Lee Todd, respectively, spoke repeatedly, in speeches, interviews, campus-wide emails, and numerous other situations and media, of the

negative effects of government budget cuts. These presidents are not at all alone; nationally, one would be severely hard-pressed to find a public university in which the president did not complain of such legislation concerning her/his school.

What is exceedingly interesting, then, given this knowledge, is that, with even a cursory look at the numbers, positing that government cuts are the primary reason behind such increases would be balancing on an exceptionally feeble statistical stanchion. At the University of Kentucky, for instance, for the past 30 years, state government aid for tuition has remained remarkably stable. In the past decade, in fact, the largest negative deviation from the average of government aid has peaked at 92 percent—while the largest deviation overall came at 111 percent (*Operating & Capital Budget*, University of Kentucky). Tuition, on the other hand, has steadily increased throughout all of this time. And if one looks on a national level, this is the trend practically everywhere.

This is where the anomaly emerges: tuition almost always goes up. Even with several years of increased subsidies (discounting the possibility of one outlier of a positive budget increase being offset by years of cuts). Between 2005 and 2008, state funding for the University of Kentucky saw its highest increase in a decade, from \$280 to \$335 million, at a 120 percent increase. Meanwhile, however, tuition rose from \$5,164 to \$7,096, at a 137 percent increase. (*Operating & Capital Budget*, University of Kentucky).

Again, one must be clear in establishing that the author's school is in no way anomalous in the exhibition of the aforementioned anomaly; it has occurred, and continues occurring, across the entire United States. It is shockingly commonplace, so much so, in fact, that the rare circumstances in which the contrary takes place are strange indeed.

If government cuts, consequently, is not “*the* answer,” why is tuition increasing so dramatically? The author continues the investigation of this question in his film. A common response is that such increases are because of increases in faculty pay. This, alas, does not agree with the facts either. Between 1999 and 2009, in any sector of spending, faculty compensation never exceeded 40 percent of total spending, and this proportion of faculty compensation spent on faculty has either stayed flat or decreased. Furthermore, between 2002 and 2009, when adjusted for inflation, faculty saw minute or no overall increase in average salaries (*Trends in College Spending*, Delta Cost Project).

Such a position becomes moreover starkly erroneous in the consideration that faculty represent a surprisingly small, and ever- increasingly smaller, minority of overall public university employment. Universally, at four-year institutions, faculty account for less than half of total employees (*Trends in College Spending*, Delta Cost Project). At the University of Kentucky, for instance, faculty made up only 17.6 percent of the university’s total 2010-2011 full-time employees (*Fact Booklet*, University of Kentucky).

Numerous other reasons were explored. A shockingly common response, among those that are not scholars of the subject, was that “too many” students now go to school, and, thus, in an over-simplified case of supply and demand, the price of education should increase, to rid the market of its excess demand. Cursory empirical study, however, naysays such a notion, demonstrating that, on years in which student enrollments decreased, tuition still increased. Others maintain that universities cannot support so many students. Once more, however, one quickly can repudiate such a claim in consideration that, if universities were really at their supposed “carrying capacity,” why would they continue pushing to increase student enrollments?

A diverse array of scholars from a wide variety of disciplines was interviewed, to provide insight into what, then, could be the potential reasons. Numerous of these have been explored, and research of them will continue. Lamentably, however, given the confines of this work, the author has not the time to go into detail concerning such factors.

Such factors aside, nonetheless, the author would be remiss if he were not to mention one of the most significant observations in his research—one that has and will continue to impact his research. State support for the University of Kentucky went from \$335.1 million in 2007-08 to \$303.4 million in 2011-12, an almost 10 percent decline (*University of Kentucky plans 6 percent tuition hike, 3 percent pay raises*, Lexington Herald-Leader); tuition rose from \$7,096 in 2007-08 to \$9,128 in 2011-12, at an approximately 129% increase (*Kentucky Public Colleges and Universities – Full-Time Undergraduate Resident Tuition and Fees*, Kentucky Council of Postsecondary Education); and, yet, in the meantime, the operating budget of the university rose from approximately \$2,000,000 to \$2,675,000 (*Operating and Capital Budget*, University of Kentucky). The University of Kentucky is in no way alone. All across the United States, the cost of maintaining universities—and, given their non-profit status, also revenue—has, essentially without exception, continues to grow. Where such revenue comes from, and how exactly tuition fits into filling such a gap is of a Brobdingnagian magnitude of complexity, and, hence, cannot be adequately explored within the confines of this work, yet the point is perfectly patent: the average total costs of universities goes up. Some claim this is because of ever-increasing enrollments of more and more students, yet, if the total cost per student becomes greater each and every year, it means universities are getting less and less efficient. Whether such a market metric is appropriate in the consideration of public higher education, a public service, is certainly contestable, yet the idea is an important one to, at the very least, entertain.

In summation, the topic is still to be very intensely researched and explored, yet the author has already come to these several very significant conclusions in his research, conclusions that will guide him in his further understanding—and, thus, through his film, in others' further understanding—of this incredibly complex issue.

A trailer for the film can currently be accessed at www.TuitionFilm.com. Progress on the documentary will continue, and it too will eventually be accessible, free of charge, at the same site.