Higher Ed’s Big Test

STATE’S TOP EDUCATION LEADERS EMPHASIZE TRANSFORMATION DURING A TIME OF GREAT UPHEAVAL

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On funding: This is a critical issue that needs more attention at the policy, philanthropy, and institutional leadership levels. Resetting priorities that drive budgets and working with state legislatures to ensure that higher education offers is what states need, are just two strategies that are already happening. Also, enrollment and budgetary challenges are being experienced in markedly different ways in private, for-profit, and community college systems, so there really is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Undergraduate enrollment has been declining for at least six years. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse show a drop from a historic dip in 2020. Students who left college during the pandemic are a historic drop in 2020. Students who house show a bit of a recovery from the National Student Clearinghouse, so there really is no one-size-fits-all solution.

On student debt: College is not merely academic education anymore. Costs have increased in relation to the growth of other services universities provide, such as strong and varied athletic programs, comprehensive gyms, better dormitories and dining facilities, broader counseling services for mental health as well as career placement. Because parents spend the “best colleges” for their children, schools have had to increase these ancillary offerings to attract them. Make no mistake, consumers then pay for all the extras in higher education. As you mentioned, privileged students take for granted. In response to this, the education market has become very segmented as it competes for the same students previously served by only a few schools. There are more options in most markets, ranging from high-end offerings from prestigious schools to lesser offerings from schools that are not nationally accredited. This excess supply in relation to demand is placing enormous pressure on mid-tier schools. We will see (some) fail. This is painful to watch, but probably unavoidable as the industry seeks to balance itself once again.

On student debt: Pursuing an undergraduate degree often means taking on significant financial responsibility, but it can be viewed as an investment in your future career. Some colleges charge over $60,000 in tuition and fees alone, and with added expenses like room and board, the total cost may exceed $100,000 per year. Washington residents graduate with $55,800 in student loan debt. If the cost is the most important factor to you, consider attending a (free) community college for the first two years before transferring to a bachelor’s program. This approach allows you to control expenses, though transferring into competitive degree programs is not always guaranteed, and you might not get the four-year college experience or amenities at a community college.

On funding: For non-profit institutions, revenue can be simplified into three major categories: tuition (enrollment), research overhead, and donations/endowment. Teaching-focused institutions typically have lower research overhead, and private institutions do not receive revenue from state appropriations. University can either continue or accelerate tuition increases, making affordability increasingly difficult, or increase class sizes, affecting the student learning experience. Exploring diversified revenue sources may interfere with the core mission of teaching and mentoring students. Higher education grapples with the “iron triangle” of access and affordability, attainment, and quality while striving to do more with less.

On affirmative action: While Washington is one of nine states that have prohibited race-based college admissions through Initiative 200, the recent Supreme Court ruling perpetuates institutional racism and inequities, despite acknowledging their existence. The achievement gap between privileged class has set the rules in colleges and universities. Underrepresented communities, primarily along racial lines, often lacked opportunities to participate in advanced placement, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, which privileged students take for granted. In a holistic admissions review, the recent
On student debt: There are two things we can do to make college more affordable and accessible. The first is to increase the financial aid available to students from low- and middle-income families. The other crucial part of scholarship aid comes from states and the federal government. Increasing the Pell Grant — a federal program that, unlike a loan, doesn’t need to be repaid — along with state grants such as the Washington College Grant, is a critical part of scholarship aid. Private philanthropy is also key. Finally, we must better communicate to families the “net price” — or true cost — of college attendance, which varies widely by student. The UW provides a net price calculator.

On affirmative action: Public and private universities will be affected differently, and the effects will also vary widely by state, but the UW, and most of our peers, remain firmly committed to creating opportunity and expanding access to a world-class education for students from all backgrounds, which is central to our public mission.

For us, I-200 already bars the use of race in admissions for public universities in the state of Washington, so we expect the impact on our admission process to be relatively small. At the moment, we are carefully reviewing the ruling to understand what, if any, impacts it will have on public universities in our state.

On student debt: Student debt is a real burden, but there are pathways to an affordable bachelor’s degree that can lead to higher earnings over students’ lifetimes (studies show those with degrees earn more than $1 million over the course of their lifetimes than those who never graduated college).

A bachelor’s degree is within reach for most students, and we call for collective efforts across higher education, state, and federal government, and private philanthropy. A bachelor’s degree is crucial to the progress of the United States 50 years ago, and that our students and our country deserve today.

Sarah Bolton
PRESIDENT, WHITMAN COLLEGE

On affirmative action: The Court’s decision sends a very mistaken message to students of color — that they may “deserve” a place in higher education, but that there is no need to redress the lasting effects of hundreds of years of racial exclusion and injustice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The challenges of the future will require leaders from every experience and perspective. Diverse campus communities, and campuses that are genuinely welcoming for all students, are both a moral imperative and crucial to our mission of student learning, thriving, and preparation for lives of purpose.

The Court’s message may (also) discourage some students from even considering college. In the wake of the Court’s decision, colleges and universities are called to redouble their efforts to become places that are more ever more excellent, diverse, and equitable, while following the law. That means sending admissions staff to reach out to and visit high schools that represent the broad diversity of our nation, making strong financial aid a top priority, ensuring that our campuses provide excellent experiences for all students, and being honest with ourselves about places we need to change.

On funding: Our students have lived through unprecedented times, and they are thinking about their futures in new ways. In the long run, making educational opportunity work financially will call for collective efforts across higher education, state, and federal government, and private philanthropy. These are the kinds of shared investments that were crucial to the progress of the United States 50 years ago, and that our students and our country deserve today.

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A bachelor’s degree is within reach for most students attending their state public institutions, especially here in Washington, a national leader in affordability through the Washington College Grant. The Husky Promise also ensures that students eligible for the Washington College Grant pay no tuition at the UW — 40,000 plus students have benefited in the last decade. Overall, about 70% of UW undergraduates leave with no known debt, and the average debt for those who do owe is around $20,000 — which is likely to be offset by increased earnings.

To keep college affordable, the federal government must continue investing in programs like the Pell Grant, which supports social mobility and is good for our whole society. States must also invest in our own states’ college systems. Private philanthropy is also key. Finally, we must better communicate to families the “net price” — or true cost — of college attendance, which varies widely by student. The UW provides a net price calculator.

The majority of student debt is actually for graduate and professional degrees, and there should be more support for those skilled professionals who serve the public good, like healthcare workers and teachers. For example, donors have created endowments to enable low-income students to attend medical school, and I support federal “loan repayment,” whereby a portion of the loan is forgiven for individuals who practice in underrepresented communities.

On funding: States would be wise to reinvest in public colleges and universities because they pay huge dividends in education, discovery, innovation, community service, and economic impact. The UW alone creates an annual economic impact of $15.7 billion in the state of Washington, compared to the state’s investment of just over half a billion dollars.

It’s true that demographic trends mean that there is a drop-off in college-age students, and depending on the state, some degree of consolidation may be necessary, similar to what we are seeing in K-12 education. However, in states like ours, where participation rates are already very low, we need to do more to ensure that every high school student has the opportunity to earn a post-high school credential.

Many students are missing out on opportunities to expand their horizons and their economic prospects because they aren’t prepared or encouraged to consider college as an option. Higher ed should also be thinking broadly about funding sources — including philanthropy and industry, because our institutions are engaged across all these sectors, working to address the most pressing and complex challenges of our time.

We believe we can do even better by convincing more students and their families to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid each year. Known as the FAFSA, this is what determines eligibility for many college aid programs, yet the percentage of FAFSA submissions from high school seniors in Washington is among the lowest in the nation. Plus, choosing not to fill out the FAFSA might be ineligible for federal aid still can qualify for state-provided assistance.

Half of all our students graduate with no student loan debt. Students who take out loans, their total student debt upon graduation averages $23,700. To put that into perspective, their total debt for a college degree is less than the average cost of a reliable used car.

On funding: It’s absolutely true that we have become more reliant on donor support to fund some core operations and activities, as Great Recession-era reductions have not been reversed. We have been fortunate that industry in particular has seen the value in funding endowments that provide ongoing support for purposes to enhance education and research that otherwise wouldn’t exist. Our state has generously funded affordability and workforce development initiatives since the Great Recession. Declining college attendance is a fiscal problem, not just for institutions but for workforce problem for employers and an equity problem for society at large. As our population changes, we will have to help make sure their students are aware of the higher education opportunities and assistance that are available.

On student debt: More work is always needed, but the state of Washington offers some of the nation’s most generous student aid programs, and the actual numbers for WSU might be surprising. Three out of four students receive some form of financial aid. Of those, more than two-thirds (69%) receive grant or scholarship aid that does not need to be repaid. More than a third of students (37%) pay no tuition at all.

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