

# The Disconnect in Higher Education

There is a disconnect in higher education in the United States today. It is discernible at the intersection of two basic, mostly uncontroversial claims: 1. Everything you need to know for a college degree is available online for free. And 2. The average cost of a U.S. college degree is over \$100,000.00. Because nearly everyone can access the internet, and because many individuals and organizations have shared lots of high quality learning and instructional resources—including content covering entire courses at the college level—more academic information is available and accessible to you than has ever been to any generation before. So much so that everything you need for a degree in philosophy (and many, if not most other undergraduate degrees) is available for free—if you know what to look for. At the same time, the cost for a typical four-year degree in the U.S. has been continually climbing, now sometimes reaching over \$200,000.00+.<sup>1</sup>

I believe a quality education is extremely valuable. In fact, I could make a case for the value of a good quality education, including a degree in philosophy in excess of \$200,000.00. To be clear, I'm not trying to defend current college costs—I think they are indefensible. But I am suggesting that the problem with the cost is not that education is not valuable. The problem is that these costs make education exclusive—only realistically accessible to a tiny portion of the population. And in light of the continually increasing free availability of degree-level learning for everyone, the current price tag is becoming very difficult to justify.

In this brief introductory book, I won't go into the reasons that the cost of a degree has been steadily climbing<sup>2</sup>--at a rate outpacing nearly every other U.S. industry, including food,

---

<sup>1</sup> Livesay, Jacob. "What is the most expensive college? Here's a list of the priciest schools across the US." *USA Today Money*. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2023/02/17/what-is-the-most-expensive-college/10487837002/> Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Campos, Paul. "The Real Reason College Tuition Costs So Much." *The New York Times*, 4 April 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/the-real-reason-college-tuition-costs-so-much.html>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2017.

housing, and healthcare, since at least the 1980s—but I will note at least one appalling consequence: the rising cost has resulted in many college graduates leaving school with crippling debt, a burden recognized by many as nothing less than a crisis<sup>3</sup>, with students who have very little ability to pay it back in a timely manner,<sup>4</sup> so the debt load is often much bigger than the original amount borrowed. And again—maybe I’m belaboring this point by now—the steep increase in price feels all the more insulting when the requisite information one needs to master for a degree is free and readily available online.

I find it disappointing and discouraging that we have to focus on the price and a student’s ability to pay back their student loan debt because it can distract us from the values of a quality education outside of its ability to lead to a high-paying job. This focus means we set aside other values to higher education; values like being an informed citizen, being able to communicate effectively, being able to analyze complicated topics intelligently, or even, as Aristotle framed it, being able to flourish as a human. But when the cost reaches a certain point (and I would say that point is well before \$100K) we are regrettably forced to put ‘ability to get hired for a high-paying job to pay that off’ as very near to, or the number one concern and take away from a college education.

Note that this doesn’t really change for people who can afford college, or whose parents pay their tuition. It’s a rare parent or benefactor who will provide \$100K+ for a college education without some sort of stipulation that the student earns a degree with high earning potential. And, while it may make all the difference for an individual, it also doesn’t really change, even if the government or other sponsoring agency foots the bill. Once the cost moves past a certain point, a primary, justifiable concern for whoever is paying predictably becomes: how can we be sure we

---

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Daniel M. “What Will It Take to Solve the Student Loan Crisis?” *Harvard Business Review*. 23 September, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/09/what-will-it-take-to-solve-the-student-loan-crisis>. Accessed 9 October, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Taibbi, Matt. “The Great College Loan Swindle.” *Rolling Stone*, 3 Nov. 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/taibbi-the-great-college-loan-swindle-w510880>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2017.

can recoup it? I've presented the disconnect, and one of the significant implications of the high cost of college (that when the cost exceeds a certain point, post-college job earning unavoidably becomes the primary driver for college discussions) but I haven't said why we have the disconnect, or how we could resolve it. That's what I'll turn to next.