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Debate Over Cost of College Starts With Who Gets to Define the Problem

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College leaders, faculty members, and financial officers agree that the cost of higher education amounts to a crisis, but they have different ideas about how to resolve it, says a report released today by the nonpartisan research group **Public Agenda**.

"Extended discussion and dialogue" among those groups and others will be necessary in making "perhaps difficult decisions" during what may turn out to be a prolonged economic downturn, the report says.

[The report](#), "Campus Commons: What Faculty, Financial Officers and Others Think About Controlling College Costs," seeks to lay the groundwork for that discussion. It describes studies of various stakeholder groups conducted by the research group in partnership with the Making Opportunity Affordable Initiative of the Lumina Foundation for Education.

Those studies include interviews with 30 college presidents; interviews with 18 financial officers in public higher education, at both the state and institutional levels; and focus-group discussions with faculty members. The report also draws on existing research, including Public Agenda's own polling data on the public's views on higher education.

The 28-page document suggests that policy makers, lawmakers, and college administrators include professors in discussions of higher-education reforms, in order to avoid an "us versus them" atmosphere on campuses. Only with all points of view being equally heard can effective changes be made, it says.

Although the report's authors cited "a broadly shared consensus on the existence of a problem," they wrote that "there is not yet a shared definition of the problem, nor are stakeholders necessarily focused on similar solutions."

For example, college presidents and financial officers agreed that institutions were caught between rising expenses and shrinking state support. But the financial officers, particularly those at the state level, said colleges should increase productivity through distance education and larger classes, while the presidents believed their institutions were being as productive as possible and deserved more funds because they provided a public good.

Touchy Subject for Professors

For faculty members, the subject of productivity raises other concerns, the report says. To them, it means simply "asking faculty to do more with less," which leads them to worry about the quality of the education provided.

They also fear that pushing colleges to graduate more students—the primary goal of state higher-education officials—inevitably means lowering standards to make it easier to get a degree. Several professors interviewed said they thought offering remedial courses diluted the quality of students at a university.

But making a degree harder to earn may not sit well with the public, the report says.

Professors who would like to make their programs more selective may also face backlash from

Washington. President Obama has called for all Americans to attend at least some college-level classes, and he hopes that the nation will have the world's highest number of college graduates, per capita, by 2020.

With those competing interests and opposing perspectives, Public Agenda acknowledges the difficulty of getting a good discussion going. The report concludes, however, that such a debate, heated as it may be, is a necessary first step.