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## Of Many Minds on College Costs

By Doug Lederman

*"On this quality issue, faculty members don't want to work any more than they have to, basically. I'm just going to say it like it is. How would you reduce quality if you were teaching a class that had 15 students in it, and we said you've got to teach 18 students? Tell me how that reduces quality."*

-- State financial officer

*"People think that somehow lecturing to 40 students is the same as lecturing to 20 students. Fine, it probably is. But we don't lecture that much anyway. You try grading 40 papers instead of 20 papers, then we're talking about the issue."*

--Professor, 2-year college

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When people talk about "colleges" doing this or that, or "higher education" failing to confront one problem or another, to whom are they referring? Anyone who has worked in or around the academy knows all too well that colleges and universities are made up of significantly different audiences that approach any given subject from widely divergent perspectives. It's probably not surprising, then, that quick and decisive action to deal with emerging problems may be hard to come by.

That's essentially the point of [a report about college costs and prices released today](#) by **Public Agenda**, a nonprofit group that is working with the Lumina Foundation for Education's [Making Opportunity](#)

[Affordable](#) project. Following up on reports that examined the views of [college presidents](#) and the [general public](#), Public Agenda's new study, "Campus Commons? What Faculty, Financial Officers and Others Think About Controlling College Costs" compares the views of professors and campus and state financial officers with those of presidents on how they define the "problems" in higher education, the depth and breadth of those problems, and the potential solutions.

What becomes clear from the group's study -- which is based on intensive interviews and focus groups with small numbers of the various groups -- is that the parties diagnose the problems a little differently, but have wider disagreements still about what steps, if any, might be appropriate to take in response. Public Agenda issued its report not to explain away why, as some critics have asserted, colleges have been slow or reluctant to make the sorts of major changes that might increase their efficiency or decrease their spending and, in turn, the prices they charge students. Rather, the group says, it aims to lay bare the differences now to "lay the groundwork" for necessary conversations among the relevant parties about what might be done.

Especially important, Public Agenda says, is systematically giving faculty members "a place at the table" in those discussions, for several reasons. Doing so "can start the process of having faculty share ownership of the problem and

prevent discussions from devolving into 'us versus them' arguments.

It can help policy makers better understand and factor faculty concerns into their thinking -- concerns about declining academic quality, along with concerns about the productivity agenda generally and specific strategies associated with it. It can also reassure faculty that their perspective will be heard and seriously considered in the policy debate. Although it is often tempting to look for solutions initially among groups of people who already see eye-to-eye, long-lasting and more authentic progress often emerges from hearing different points of view early on."

Public Agenda's Jean Johnson, one of the report's authors, added in an interview: "You need the faculty for almost all of solutions, but the faculty are not yet in this conversation, especially in the states. The notion that you can fix this without bringing the different parts to the table is dangerous."

It's not uncommon, Public Agenda officials say, for "crosstalk" -- divergent perspectives and opinions -- to exist on vexing and longstanding public policy issues, and its interviews on the topic of financing public higher education find plenty. Interviews with the chief financial officers of public two-year and four-year colleges and 11 CFO's of state higher education agencies finds that they, like the campus presidents that Public Agenda surveyed earlier, see institutions getting squeezed by a



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confluence of declining state spending on higher education and the rising costs of operating their colleges.

"[T]he share of the state general fund budget going to higher education has dropped from like 23 percent to like 11 percent in the last 25 years, so we're just getting a smaller and smaller piece of the pie all the time," said a typical comment from one state higher education budget officer. "Before you can even get started, that's sort of issue number one that we're fighting with."

Most of the college presidents Public Agenda surveyed said they believed their institutions had already made most of the changes that would result in increased productivity or efficiency. Not so the budget officers, many of whom said they thought public colleges could make better use of technology and dual enrollment of students in high school and college, look more critically at how they use facilities and faculty resources, and do a better job getting students through college -- especially if incentives were changed to reward them for student completion rather than enrollment.

Said one: "It's difficult to crawl in there and say to the grumblers, 'Okay, why is your teaching load what it is?' A great example would be at our institution, you might have a professor who in the early to middle years was most productive in their research. You've given them relief from teaching along the way because they're in their very productive years. The problem with that has been when you get to their later years, they forget why they got that, and so you're going back to people that are very qualified to teach and saying, 'You need to teach

more now, so this other new professor that came behind you, that is productive in their research years, can carry less.' That's a very difficult transition to make, but we've got to get there."

And another: "All we're talking about is the idea that retention happens one course at a time and putting the incentive in place that you don't get paid for that student unless they're there at the end of the term, not just in the front. There are a host of other ways besides dumbing down the curriculum."

#### **From the Faculty Perspective...**

Public Agenda's discussions with professors about the key problems in higher education revealed a very different set of concerns, focused mostly on what they see as the already eroding quality of their students.

Over 42 years of full-time teaching, one four-year college professor said, "I've experienced tremendous pressures on myself, and I've witnessed it among my colleagues, too, to reduce the extent of the reading assignments that we give our students. I think part of the reason is the increasing inability of the students to come up with -- to have the ability to do the assignments. Also, grade inflation, the extent to which, I mean, if everyone else is giving them B's and A's for what I consider to be C work, they're not going to be too interested in taking my courses when they know they can very easily get an easier experience from a colleague."

In the face of that perceived decline, which was widely shared, the CFO's suggestions that professors should be trying to educate more students, or that

institutions should be held accountable for how many students they push through to completion of degrees or other credentials, seemed counterintuitive to many of the faculty members.

"What we're all dancing around and haven't actually talked about is that -- we would never say this in the classroom, but sometimes you want to say to a student, 'Maybe this isn't the place for you. You don't have to go to college,'" said one typical four-year instructor.

"Yep. We'll be forced to lower standards and graduate more numbers. That's why you get paid. You know what? You're going to find ways to get that done," said a two-year college professor, while another said: "What happened in high schools is they got pressured to graduate more students, so they graduated more students. It didn't mean they were well educated, but they graduated them, right?"

Proposals to increase productivity struck many of the professors interviewed as wrongheaded and certain to produce the wrong outcomes. "There was an old skit on 'I Love Lucy' where Lucy and Ethel were working on this line with chocolates. As chocolates came down the line, they were putting something in the damned chocolate. I'm not exactly sure. All of a sudden there's a demand on them to produce more chocolates, so here came more chocolates. They're trying to do this, and eventually the chocolates that came out didn't have any cherries in them or whatever they were supposed to have and they fell on the floor. I think that's kind of where I see we're going. There's only so many chocolates that you can stuff, for lack of a better term.



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It's a horrible analogy, and I apologize."