

Experts in the Higher Education Space Sound Off on the Issue of Affordability



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A panel of education experts share insights into the college affordability crisis and suggest simple steps anyone can take to manage the costs of education.

Why is college affordability such a big issue right now?

Luvleen Sidhu: Students and their families are focused on saving for education and making sure the degree they choose is worth the investment. College administrators are balancing tuition rates and the investments necessary to attract students. Lastly, the health of the economy depends on introducing skilled workers not overly-burdened with a lifetime of student debt.

Kent Peterson: Affordability isn't a new issue. There's more focus on it for a few reasons: states are more active on the topic. We have more data and understanding of the value of an education and the burden of student debt. And students have become savvier consumers. Most importantly, it's critical for students to get a positive return on their college investment.

Michael Hansen: The affordability problem in higher education is decades old. At its best, higher education levels the playing field, providing every learner with the opportunity to succeed — but the reality is often the opposite. Every provider of education, as an institution or learning materials company, has to ask the question: is the product or service I am providing commensurate with the price I am charging? Too often the answer in the minds of students is no. We have a responsibility to remove barriers and provide value for money.

Kim Oppelt: College affordability has always been part of the con-

versation, but now that more and more students from first-generation and underrepresented backgrounds are applying to college, the issue has an even more urgent message. With college costs rising year after year and the need for some sort of training after high school more necessary, we are facing a discrepancy in those who can afford their expected family contribution (EFC) and those who can't. Even fees for books and housing deposits can put families into the red, so the issue of access goes even beyond tuition costs. Families are struggling to weigh the benefits of an expensive college with their everyday costs, therefore reigniting the conversation of college affordability.

What are a few simple ways that students and families can offset college costs?

LS: Guidance offices and on-campus money management centers are great places to explore financial literacy resources, scholarships and grants. Students on financial aid may be eligible for work-study jobs. Additionally, starting a 529 early in a student's life and learning to budget and save can make a big difference.

KP: Understand the various format options for course materials that are available today — from digital courseware, to eBooks, to rental and loose-leaf. And it's not just about finding the lowest-cost option. Digital learning materials can offer powerful, personalized learning experiences and support the skills necessary to enter the workforce.

MH: A study of over 20,000 students in Florida revealed that 64 percent of students have opted not to purchase a required textbook due to cost. Attending college is an important investment, but too often students are compelled to put that investment at risk due to the high prices of course materials. It is critical we do better for today's students. Low cost, all-you-can-learn subscription services to course materials and digital courseware can offer learners affordable, high-quality learning materials to keep them enrolled and on track.

KO: Start early. Families can learn about the true cost of college early in their child's K-12 career. By starting a 529 plan if possible, being aware of concepts such as EFC and FAFSA, and modeling and teaching responsible spending, students can be set up for success by the time they get to college. Students can also be best-prepared for merit aid at institutions by working to increase their GPA, getting involved in school and community activities, and choosing courses responsibly.

What are the ways in which you can make your college experience more accessible?

LS: Take advantage of every opportunity on campus to learn and get involved. Learn about clubs and groups sponsored by the student activities council, listen to a visiting lecturer, explore the campus art museum and attend

office hours offered by your professors. Campuses are teeming with opportunities to engage.

KP: What's most important is making college success as accessible as possible — and improving on the dismal graduation rates at many U.S. colleges.

The good news is that technology can help by enabling more personalized learning experiences that improve student success rates. It's an effective and scalable solution to one of the most pressing challenges in higher education.

MH: Students can't access quality learning if they can't afford the materials. We also know that not having the materials in time sets the student back and causes drop-out rates to increase. To reduce cost barriers to higher education, we launched Cengage Unlimited, a service that offers students one-stop access to course materials — across 70 disciplines and 675 courses — for one subscription price.

KO: College fit is a major factor in a successful college experience. The feel of campus is definitely a factor, but start the college search early and be realistic when it comes to affordability. Investigate the types of aid provided at the college and use an EFC calculator to understand the true cost. Also, check into the support services offered at the college. Is there a food bank? Is there a first-generation support center? How is the college helping all students succeed? ■