It’s easy for journalists who cover higher education to get bogged down in institutional coverage. Tuition increases, faculty fights, policy changes and seemingly endless campus controversies provide plenty of copy and can make compelling headlines. But with higher education under a microscope—from business leaders, parents, foundations and, most recently, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and her Commission on the Future of Higher Education—reporters must probe more deeply. The public wants answers. What are students learning in college, why does college cost so much and why is financial aid so complicated and difficult to navigate?

The commission stated in its September 2006 report that college students are learning less than in the past, and Spellings herself called higher education “dangerously complacent.” She also posed her own set of challenges: “Is it fine that college tuition has outpaced inflation? Is it fine that only half of our students graduate on time? Is it fine that students graduate from college so saddled with debt that they can’t buy a home or start a family?”

The goal of this primer is to encourage reporters to ask their own questions. How do the ideals of higher education match the reality in the communities you cover? The topics addressed briefly below and in greater depth throughout the primer play out nationally and on local campuses, with professors, college presidents, students, employers and policymakers all taking lead roles. Exploring them in any depth will require spending time on campus and asking questions about the local labor market and the economy, about the benefits of higher education as well as about who should bear the costs of those benefits. It means talking to the players about whether college is opening doors for those who have for too long stood outside, uninvited.

Community Colleges

Nearly half of American college students attend community colleges, but journalists spend little time exploring the stories that can be found there. Community college enrollment totals 11.6 million, with about 6.6 million of those students taking traditional college courses for credit and the rest taking non-credit courses—training related to work, learning to speak English, mastering Microsoft Word, learning pottery. Community colleges also address the pressing problem of where Americans can get the skills they need to land a decent-paying job at a time of spreading economic and cultural globalization and advancing technology. David Wessel, the deputy Washington bureau chief of the Wall Street Journal, points out in his essay that community colleges offer opportunity for low-income, first generation, students of color and adult learners. They serve as a window into economic and demographic changes and provide journalists with a powerful way to hold other parts of the educational system accountable.

Access for Low-Income Students

Prominent coverage is almost guaranteed when elite universities announce an end to early admission programs that favor the wealthy or give poorer students breaks with free and reduced tuition. State universities are beginning to extend benefits to working-class families as well, a sign that higher education is recognizing that problems of access reach across a broad spectrum of society, writes Hechinger Institute Assistant Director Liz Willen. There are fascinating stories waiting to be told about how and whether U.S. colleges are doing a good job of searching for and accepting low-income students, and then helping them succeed once they arrive on campus. Are they prepared for the workload that awaits them? Is there help available if they fall behind? Are colleges taking steps to help those who are likely to need help before they get discouraged and drop out? What is it like for low-income students at the nation’s 146 most selective campuses, where they make up just 3 percent of the students?
**Are Hispanic Students Well-Served?** [page 10]

While total college enrollment in the United States increased 120 percent between 1990 and 2003, Hispanic college enrollment jumped 212 percent. That’s a good news story. But Hispanic students are still far more likely than other students to attend community colleges, and their graduation rates remain low. “I would say we are truly in a crisis situation,” said Eugene Garcia, dean of the Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University, to reporter Emily Sachar of Bloomberg News. First-, second- and even third-generation Hispanic students start school behind and, though they make progress, don’t fully catch up.

**Private Loans: Risk and Reward** [page 13]

Education loans are a fact of life for all but the wealthiest students. Pell Grants for needy students have increased in overall volume but haven’t kept up with tuition. Federal loan limits—$23,000 for undergrads—haven’t kept up either. PLUS loans, which are unsubsidized government loans, aren’t available to everyone. All of that has created a demand for private higher education loans—which are market-based loans with adjustable interest rates that are priced like credit cards. In other words, those with the least need to borrow the money pay the lowest interest rates. According to the College Board, private education loans accounted for 25 percent of education borrowing in 2005-2006. But some in the industry think it’s actually higher. The volume of private loans—offered by Sallie Mae, the largest provider, as well as banks, and specialty finance companies—is growing by 30 percent to 40 percent per year. Such loans are now routinely packaged with the financial aid award letter sent out by colleges and they undoubtedly are an important means of ensuring that students are able to pay the rising costs of college. But there is growing concern that students are graduating with too much debt of all types and that repaying $50,000 or $100,000 or more in private loans will saddle borrowers with unimaginable debt loads, writes Hechinger Institute Director Richard Lee Colvin.

**The Growing Presence of For-Profit Education** [page 16]

For-profit education is a $15 billion business, and the number of students signing up is growing at a rate of between 7 percent to 10 percent per year, according to EduVentures, a Boston-based consulting group. Some 1.2 million students attend for-profit colleges, out of the 17.4 million enrolled in all of postsecondary education, according to U.S. Census data and the National Center for Education Statistics. For many students—particularly adults seeking job-specific skills—for-profit schools may make a lot of sense, writes Emily Sachar of Bloomberg News. When such companies are publicly traded, though, the pressure to add students intensifies. That’s led to lawsuits charging that schools are illegally paying bonuses to recruiters based on the number of students they sign up—and created some interesting stories for higher education reporters.

**Are College Students Learning?** [page 19]

Are you asking college administrators or professors how they know students are learning? Don’t be satisfied by statistics on how many students pass their classes or how many get A’s. A rising chorus of critics maintains that many graduates are unprepared for either the job market or for graduate and professional school, writes Hechinger Institute senior fellow Gene I. Maeroff. Efforts underway to measure just how much college students are learning should inspire reporters to probe what students are actually getting out of their college education.
**Drinking on Campus: Out of Control?** [page 22]

One clear truth emerged from the allegations of a sexual attack on a stripper by members of the Duke University lacrosse team near the Durham, N.C., campus last spring: Great quantities of alcohol were involved. The incident served to deepen fears about bad behavior and dangerous consequences when young people drink to excess, Jane Stancill of the *News & Observer* in Raleigh, N.C., writes. The statistics are frightening: A 2002 report from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism said drinking contributed to 1,400 deaths, 500,000 injuries, 600,000 assaults and 70,000 sexual assaults among adults aged 18 to 24 annually. Stancill advises reporters to put the issue into context by finding data that looks at drinking on local campuses over time.

**Virtual Classes and Learning** [page 25]

The number of undergrads and graduate students taking courses and earning degrees online is soaring. Some 3.1 million college students are thought to have taken at least one online course in 2005-06. All told, 63 percent of both public and private schools offer courses online. “Online education is about breaking down barriers for students who otherwise might not have the chance,” Burks Oakley, director of University of Illinois Online, tells Emily Sachar of Bloomberg News. Online learning crosses state lines and international borders, and by some estimates, more than 25,000 courses are now available online.

**Declining State Support for Higher Education** [page 28]

It doesn't take much time on the education beat to hear public college presidents deride a decline in state support as they announce a tuition increase. The year 2005 marked a 25-year low in state and local funding per student, according to an annual study of the Colorado-based State Higher Education Executive Officers. And tuition and fees at public four-year institutions are still up by 35 percent from five years ago after adjusting for inflation, according to a 2006 report by the College Board. Such increases raise questions about the fundamental mission of public universities, which enroll about 80 percent of U.S. college students, writes Kavita Kumar, who covers higher education for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

**Women: The New Majority on Campus** [page 31]

Women are now in the majority on many campuses, and they are doing better academically as well. There's also a widening gender gap among low-income white and Hispanic undergraduates at a time when women hold a 57 percent majority in total college enrollment, according to Jacqueline E. King, author of a July 2006 study on the gender gap. For a quick snapshot of the study, see page 31. King's study provides a rich starting point for journalists to study the implications of the changing gender balance on your local campus. Are colleges trying to address the imbalance?

**College Costs** [page 33]

Few issues create more confusion than the price tag—and the real cost—of higher education. The two are often confused, and it's not easy to get straightforward answers about why tuition continues to outpace inflation. Robert Dickeson, a former Lumina Foundation vice president who has served in academic and administrative posts at five universities and chaired two governor's cabinets, provides helpful answers to the question on the mind of parents, politicians, Secretary Spellings and students everywhere: Why does college cost so much?
Imagine you’re the metro editor of a typical daily paper. Worried about soft circulation, you want to be sure that you’re covering what readers want and need to know. You surf the Internet idly, looking for a better sense of the community your paper serves. Up pops a pie chart: “Where Do Our Kids Go to School?” It turns out that three-quarters of the students are in K-12 schools and a quarter are in college. No surprises there. But then you see that nearly 40 percent of the college students are at community colleges, not four-year schools.

You try to remember the last good story you did on the local community college, and come up blank. The education writer focuses on K-12. The state capital bureau’s coverage of the annual tug-of-war over the higher education budget is mainly about tuition at the big state university. The sports pages ignore community colleges. The business section regards stories about job training as a luxury, given the pressure for personal finance advice.

After doing a little Google reporting, you wonder why the nearly 1,200 community colleges in the United States get so little attention from the press. You wonder why Bill Gates, Alan Greenspan, Bill Clinton and George Bush talk more about community colleges than the typical newspaper writes about them. Perhaps it’s because few reporters and editors are community college grads. Perhaps it’s because community colleges are still often seen as two-year colleges for third-rate students who can’t afford four-year college tuitions.

With a little old-fashioned reporting, the kind that involves getting away from the keyboard, you’d find several reasons you should cover community colleges more aggressively:

Community colleges have evolved as a solution to a pressing problem: Where do Americans get skills they need to get a decent-paying job at a time of spreading economic and cultural globalization and advancing technology? Education is not always about earning a living, of course, but it often is. In light of America’s demonstrated excellence at training Ph.D. scientists (even if not always native born), the bigger challenge to U.S. prosperity is whether it can equip large numbers of present and future workers with skills needed to compete in the global economy.

Community colleges are where many African-Americans, Hispanics and immigrants get on the escalator of upward mobility. Among African-American undergrads, 47 percent are in community colleges; among Hispanics, 55 percent; Native Americans, 57 percent.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE WHERE THE STUDENTS ARE, OR AT LEAST A LOT OF THEM. ENROLLMENT TOTALS 11.6 MILLION, THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES SAYS. ABOUT 6.6 MILLION ARE TAKING TRADITIONAL COLLEGE COURSES FOR CREDIT; ANOTHER 5 MILLION ARE TAKING NON-CREDIT COURSES—SOMETIMES JOB-RELATED, SOMETIMES LEARNING TO SPEAK ENGLISH, SOMETIMES TRYING TO MASTER MICROSOFT WORD. TWO-THIRDS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE PART TIME. THE AVERAGE AGE IS 29.
Community colleges, like every institution we cover, need to be held accountable. What happens to the graduates of, say, the local college’s respiratory therapy program? What fraction of students who say they enroll in a community college with hopes of transferring to a four-year school do so? Is the community college broadening its mission so much that it’s ignoring its goal of offering access to higher education to low-income students? There are always outrages that make for good stories: taxpayer money being squandered on overpaid administrators, programs that don’t deliver on their promise to students, turf battles among schools that breed unwise duplication.

Community colleges help us hold other parts of the educational system accountable. How well are high schools preparing students? Check the remedial English and math enrollments at the local community college. Although community colleges don’t often boast about it, they are efficient and successful at remedial education. How quickly does a state university adapt to a rapidly changing world? Compare it to the community college, particularly programs it has begun and those it has shut in the past five years. Why does the typical four-year college cost so much? Compare it to the education provided freshman and sophomores at much lower tuition at community colleges. Are for-profit institutions more efficient or just more expensive? Compare their graduates’ success to those at the community college. Are employers bellyaching about a shortage of skilled workers? See if they’re doing anything—lending equipment, providing personnel, offering internships—to help the local community college train more of them.

Visits to community colleges can help reporters take the pulse of the place they cover—whether a small town or the whole country. What happens to the workers turned out when a company closes? Ask the community college. What jobs are hot these days? Ask the community college. (I did, and ended up with a delicious anecdote about the popularity of massage therapy training.) What frustrates people most about computer software? Ask senior citizens struggling with Microsoft Word. What’s it really like to move off welfare? Ask the welfare mom taking courses at night at the local community college, hoping to get a job when she’s done. Is there a nursing shortage? Who is meeting the increased post-Sept. 11 demand for first-responders, and how? Check the community college.

Community colleges are a sea of great examples that can make print and broadcast stories come to life. Community colleges are one of the few places in America, outside of a church, where you can be born again. When the Wall Street Journal’s Jeff Zaslow wrote about immigrants celebrating the Fourth of July, he went to Tidewater (Va.) Community College and found Bul Dut, a 7-foot-1 Kenyan immigrant, among 64 students learning English as a second language. “These new-comers say they’re often struck by the love of country displayed by their American-born neighbors,” Zaslow wrote. “One recent morning at Tidewater, Mr. Dut and two fellow students ... talked about what they planned to eat on July Fourth. Mr. Dut said that his tribe in Sudan doesn’t eat turkeys—they regard them as pets—so he wouldn’t be eating that for the holiday. The others told him that turkey is actually the meal for Thanksgiving. ‘I don’t really understand the differences between Thanksgiving and July Fourth,’ said Mr. Dut. ‘To me, there seems to be a lot of overlap.’

Yes, it was a story about the goings-on at a college. It was also a story about a community.

David Wessel is deputy Washington bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal and writes the Capital column, a weekly look at the forces shaping living standards.
Online Resources for Community College Reporting

The best stories are to be found at individual community colleges – in the classroom, the parking lot, the cafeteria, the faculty lounge. But to figure out what to look for or to put one college’s efforts in perspective, here are some places to check.

**American Association of Community Colleges** is the colleges’ main association in Washington. Among other things, it publishes statistics, issue briefs, a list of “hot programs” and a biweekly newspaper called Community College Times.

http://www.aacc.nche.edu

**Center for Community College Policy**, part of the Education Commission of the States, a Denver-based consortium of state governments, focuses on public policy issues involving community colleges.


**Chronicle of Higher Education** has a free weekly e-mail called The Community College Newsletter with links to stories in its pages about community colleges.

http://chronicle.com/cc/

The **Community College Research Center** at Teachers College, Columbia University, sponsors and disseminates research on community colleges, posting most of its work on the Web. Its Web site is a good place to find academic researchers interested in community colleges.

http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/

**Community College Business Officers**. Just what it sounds like.

http://www.ccbo.org/

**Community College Survey of Student Engagement** is an annual survey of community college students.

http://www.ccsse.org/ It is housed at the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, which trains community college administrators.

http://edadmin.edb.utexas.edu/cclp/

**Community College Week** is an independent newspaper covering the colleges.

http://www.ccweek.com/

**Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** is funding, among other things, programs to use community colleges to help improve high schools, including the Gateway to College program housed at Portland (Ore.) Community College

http://www.gatewaytocollege.org

See also

http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Education/TransformingHighSchools/Schools/ModelSchools/ECHS.htm

**League for Innovation in the Community College**, a group of community colleges that, among other things, offers useful publications on best practices.

http://www.league.org/index.cfm

**Lumina Foundation for Education**, based in Indianapolis, aims at expanding access and success in education beyond high school.

http://www.luminafoundation.org/

**Pathways to College**, a network of organizations using research to improve postsecondary education access for minorities, low-income students, those who are the first in their families to go to college and students with disabilities.

http://www.pathways2college.net/index.html
From recent headlines, it might seem a growing movement is underway to make college more affordable for the poorest students in the United States. Consider the following: “Harvard Ends Early Admission, Citing Barrier to the Disadvantaged” (New York Times); “Stanford Pursues Economic Diversity; Poorer Families Get New Financial Breaks” (San Francisco Chronicle); or “U-Va. Ends Early Decisions, in Bid for Low-Income Students” (Washington Post).

Stories heralding such new initiatives point to a growing concern among college officials, policy analysts and social critics over one of the most troubling and important issues in higher education today: The poor have all but disappeared from the campuses at many four-year colleges.

Just 3 percent of students from the bottom socioeconomic quarter—based on their families’ income, education and occupation—attend the top 146 top public and private colleges, which spend four times as much per student and have higher graduation rates, and where 74 percent of students come from the top bracket, according to a 2003 Century Foundation study by Stephen Rose and Anthony Carnevale. Within five years of beginning their education, only 6 percent of students in the bottom socioeconomic quarter will have earned a B.A. from any U.S. college at all, a disparity not explained simply by differences in academic preparation.

A Chronicle of Higher Education analysis of the 59 wealthiest colleges in the United States with endowments of $500 million or more found that on average, just 14 percent of the students at those schools received federal Pell Grants, which are awarded on the basis of need.

It’s clear the scope of the problem is so great that a handful of efforts among selective public and private schools won’t make a dent in the statistics. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education acknowledged as much in its September 2006 report, describing poor students’ access to higher education as “unduly limited” and calling for more aid to be given out based on financial need.

Reporters writing about efforts to make education more equitable must go beyond reporting the recent efforts of elite schools and flagship public universities to diversify. “It’s important that these leading institutions make this statement, but it’s a tiny drop in a huge bucket,” said Tom Mortenson, a higher education policy analyst and senior scholar at the Pell Institute in Washington, D.C., whose 2004 national postsecondary aid study identified about $31.8 billion in unmet financial aid for students who come from families earning under $62,000 a year.

Ask the colleges you cover about obstacles to recruiting and increasing the ranks of low-income students. How hard is it to find them? How great is the pressure to enroll students who can pay full price? Follow up by finding out what life is like for poor students when they arrive on campus.

Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the New York-based Century Foundation and the editor of “America’s Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education” (Century Foundation, 2004), said reporters should seek evidence that universities are

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**Where Have All the Low-Income Students Gone?**

*Not to top colleges. Despite heralded new programs, selective universities remain a haven for the affluent. Reporters should press institutions to say what they are doing about it.*

By Liz Willen

Roughly one out of two children growing up in a family with annual family income above $90,000 gets a degree from a four-year college, compared with one of 17 children in a family earning under $35,000. There is a renewed focus on policy initiatives to address the startling degree of inequality in higher education in our country. Well-endowed selective colleges and universities can exert a leading role by expanding their representation of disadvantaged students. The broad access institutions that now enroll most low-income students can develop programs to foster their success in college and work with high schools to send clearer messages about what is needed for academic success in college.

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**WHAT HIGHER ED STORIES DO THE EXPERTS THINK JOURNALISTS ARE MISSING?**

Michael S. McPherson, president, Spencer Foundation, and Morton Owen Schapiro, president, Williams College; co-authors, “College Access: Opportunity or Privilege?” (College Board, 2006)

**Issue: Access for low-income students**

Children from low-income families are much less likely to finish high school than those from affluent families. Those who do complete high school are less likely to go to college and to eventually get a degree.

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making progress. One measure of that is the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants. Even flagship public universities are seeing this number fall.

“Lots of universities and colleges say they care about this issue, but they should be held accountable,” said Kahlenberg, who has prodded presidents from some of the most selective colleges in the country to address socioeconomic diversity on their own campuses, where they would be 25 times more likely to run into a rich student than a poor one.

State universities also are grappling with the issue. Schools such as the universities of Washington, Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina have reached out to poorer students as well by capping costs and eliminating loans for students from families with incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Reporters should ask how many students will actually benefit from such plans. How do the universities intend to pay for tuition-free initiatives and how long can they continue to offer them?

Kenneth Redd, until recently director of research and policy analysis for the National Association of Student Financial Administrators, worries that all the new programs aimed at giving poor students free and reduced tuition will remain largely unavailable to students who need them most, in part because they lack the financial resources to negotiate the application process or visit the campuses, and are not well-prepared academically.

Reporters should also scrutinize the efforts of community colleges, where scholarships and tuition-free initiatives may affect far more poor students, said Jeffrey Schwartz, who heads the education program for the Appalachian Regional Commission based in Washington, D.C. The region includes 410 counties across 13 states where, on average, just 76.8 percent of the population completed high school and only 17.7 percent completed college, Schwartz said.

In the rural areas his region covers, students don’t have access to college prep courses, nor do they possess the backgrounds, world views, experiences or cultural knowledge that would allow them to feel comfortable on many four-year college campuses. Are colleges reaching out to this population?

Ask admissions officers at the schools you cover if they support a suggestion made by former Princeton University President William Bowen to place a “thumb on the scale,” favoring low-income applicants. In recent research for the Andrew Mellon Foundation, Bowen found that if colleges were to treat the economic status of low-income applicants as favorably as being the scion of an alum, the percentage of disadvantaged students at elite schools would rise from 11 percent to 17 percent.

The issue of how so-called “legacy” applicants are treated has provided a great source of stories for Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Golden. The stories, about how colleges treat the applications of the children of rich donors or potential donors and about other ways in which privilege begets privilege, won him a 2004 Pulitzer Prize. He expanded on those stories in “The Price of Admission: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates” (Crown, 2006).

Finally, don’t overlook low-income students themselves as a source of rich stories. Those who are eligible for new free- and reduced-tuition programs may speak eloquently about the hardships and obstacles they’ve overcome and their own hopes and dreams.

“I have come across students that have such diverse experiences and perspectives that could only add to the college that they choose to attend,” said Leona Ashley Oakes, a Harvard senior who helps the admissions office recruit low-income students like herself. “These are also students that could do incredible things for society because of this perspective.”

Journalists have an opportunity and an obligation to find out who is being deterred from pursuing a college education by his or her economic status. Horace Mann once dubbed education “the great equalizer of the conditions of man.” Is education in contemporary America increasingly being doled out in a way that creates greater inequalities?
A Primer for Journalists

Resources for Stories on Low-Income Students

Story Ideas

Find out if the public university in your community has changed its policies for admitting students from lower income families. Do they give a leg up to students whose parents didn't attend college or whose income falls below a certain income level? Is there discussion about changing the policies?

Find out if low-income students in the areas you cover are finding a better reception and aid package at private schools or public universities. Speak to high school guidance counselors to find out what the trends are, and if the efforts to recruit more low-income students have made a difference.

Ask what percentage of students at the schools you cover is eligible and how many actually receive federal Pell Grants to help cover the cost of their education. Has the number changed in recent years? Is the number adequate, and is anyone pressing for a change?

Find out if the institutions you cover are abandoning early admissions to give students from less privileged backgrounds more opportunity. What will such policies accomplish?

Spend time with admissions officers as they recruit low-income students. What parts of the United States are they targeting and what are they finding? Many colleges are using last year's low-income students to help with recruiting efforts. They may have dramatic stories that are worth telling.

What are admissions officers and recruiters saying to prospective low-income students and what kind of reactions do they get? What parts of the country are they visiting?

Find out how many low-income students the schools you cover have admitted. Ask how many were first in their families to go to college. How many came from high-poverty schools, single-parent families and high-poverty neighborhoods? Do you see any patterns? Are the numbers changing?

Are there any special programs or services offered to help low-income students once they get to college? Do they need extra academic preparation? How are these students fitting in on campus, and are they struggling?

Sources

Mortgaging Our Future is the new report from the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.
http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/acsfa/edlite-whatnew.html

A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education is the final report of the Spellings Commission. It explores the college affordability problem, the need to increase the Pell Grant maximum award and the complexity of the current federal system.
http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf

Measuring Up is the state report card program from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The 2006 report cards give F grades on affordability to 43 states; the 2004 state report cards gave 36 states F grades on college affordability.
http://measuringup.highereducation.org/

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Tom Mortenson, higher education policy analyst, senior scholar the Pell Institute, regularly grades colleges based on the number of Pell Grants students receive.
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From New York City to the suburbs of Los Angeles, colleges and universities are redesigning curricula, training professors to speak Spanish and making sure workers in the financial aid office can communicate clearly about loans, grants and work-study options. Their target audience: Hispanics, the fastest-growing segment of the American population.

Hispanics of all ages currently number more than 40 million residents and 14 percent of the U.S. population, according to U.S. Census data, and that figure is expected to grow to 103 million by 2050, when Hispanics would represent one-quarter of the U.S. population. The potential impact of Hispanics on higher education is enormous. Yet, the picture is extremely complex and not altogether rosy, with immigrants from such countries as Mexico faring poorly in education compared to those from Cuba and South America.

Many experts are deeply troubled by the future Hispanic students face, especially those from families with uneducated parents (the largest such share are Mexican immigrants), and they point to all manner of fundamental problems that need to be fixed. The issues, for journalists, are just waiting to be covered.

“I would say we are truly in a crisis situation,” said Eugene Garcia, dean of the Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University and former undersecretary of education in the Clinton administration. “Hispanic students face specific problems that simply must be addressed: the lack of parent education, which is a key barometer of students’ success in school; language barriers that can make learning extremely difficult; low socioeconomic status that can lead to alienation and students’ abandonment of their education; and fears of financial aid and loans that could, in many cases, unlock higher education opportunities for this population.”

Meanwhile, the political climate for immigrants is problematic and the mismatch between jobs and skills points toward the need for newcomers to acquire more education. “The federal government, as the pacesetter for the nation, must rise to the opportunity of transforming our entire country into the most competitive and productive society, especially utilizing those segments of the population that are lagging behind, such as Hispanic Americans,” said Antonio Flores, president and chief executive officer of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, which represents more than 450 schools of higher learning. One in 3 new workers joining the U.S. labor force is Hispanic, a figure expected to grow to 1 in 2 by 2025, according to Flores.

Data tell the growth story: While total college enrollment in the United States increased 120 percent between 1990 and 2003, Hispanic college enrollment jumped 212 percent, and some say it will grow even even faster when Hispanics gain more understanding of the intricacies of the student aid process. While Hispanics represented 5.7 percent of the 13.8 million college enrollment in 1990, today they are 10 percent of the 16.6 million enrollees. By comparison, Native American enrollment, as a share of the total, grew from 0.7 percent to about 1 percent during the same period; black enrollment generally held steady at around 12 percent, Census data show.

The fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population will have an enormous impact on colleges in the coming years. The challenges, for students and institutions, are steep.

By Emily Sachar

Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy and research, Excelencia in Education

Issue: Financial aid for Latino students

In 2003-04, Latino undergraduate students received the least average amount of financial aid to pay for college of any racial/ethnic group. Given the need for a college education to be competitive in today’s workforce and the youth, growth and limited educational attainment of Latinos in the United States, the role of financial aid in facilitating or limiting college choices is critical to understand. We know that Latino students are more likely to be first-generation college students, to live with their parents, and to have relatively lower family incomes compared to other groups. We also know that Latino students are less likely to take out loans to pay for college and are more likely to enroll part time at community colleges and to be concentrated in a small number of states. How much do social characteristics explain Latino students’ relative loan aversion, attendance patterns and institutional choices in higher education? What can we do at the federal, state and institutional policy levels to positively influence the college choices that will increase the likelihood that Latino students will earn at least a bachelor’s degree?

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A plethora of complex issues deserve reporters’ attention:

An increasing number of cities and states now have sizeable Hispanic populations, many of whom are tax-paying citizens with growing political clout. Hispanic-serving institutions—those where Hispanic students make up at least 25 percent of undergraduate enrollment—constitute about 6 percent of colleges and universities in the United States. This small number of institutions enrolls almost half of Latino college students. Finding such institutions in your area and studying the actions they have taken to accommodate this growth will make for great copy.

Despite steady strides in the past 20 years, Hispanics still post much-lower-than-average college completion rates compared with their peers. For instance, while 30.5 percent of whites and 17.7 percent of blacks 25 and older had completed four years of college in 2005, the figure was only 12 percent for Hispanics, according to Census data. Reporters can not only probe the reasons for these trends at local institutions, but may focus on individual students to relate compelling personal stories.

Colleges are making significant adjustments to curricula, providing Spanish lessons to faculty and staff, and altering social settings to entice Hispanic students and make employees of Hispanic origin more comfortable. These adjustments have created rifts on some campuses—with critics challenging what they consider favoritism, for instance.

A strong story is developing on Hispanic enrollment in two-year institutions as a gateway to the four-year experience. Fifty-eight percent of Hispanics attend two-year colleges compared with 40 percent of blacks and 38 percent of the nation’s college students overall. Following this trend—reporting on the reasons Hispanics are drawn to two-year, as opposed to four-year, colleges—and the educational experiences of those students will make for compelling copy.

Despite the growth in their overall post-high-school attendance, Hispanic students’ completion of four-year degrees lags behind that of other student groups. This may reflect an unwillingness to forgo short-term opportunities to earn an income while attending classes. It may also reflect college policies designed for traditional students rather than for students attending part time and working. Research shows that students who attend open-access colleges are much less likely to complete their educations. Why? Is it because the colleges are not serving their needs? Do these colleges, which tend to have very thin operating margins, provide the support services required for student success? The actions colleges and universities take and don’t take to entice and retain more Hispanics in four-year institutions should figure in articles that journalists write.

Hispanics struggle to obtain and understand financial aid options. A 2004 survey by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute at USC found that 43 percent of Latinos who did not attend college could not name a single source of financial aid, such as scholarships, grants, loans or work study. Stories focusing on what students tell you about their knowledge of financial aid sources should prove powerful.

It is no surprise that fully one-half of all higher-ed attendees in California are Hispanic. But look around carefully in your region. The Hispanic population is growing even in such states as [continued on page 35]
RESOURCES:

Resources for Covering Hispanic Enrollment

QUESTIONS TO ASK
How are Hispanic students in your state faring? Are they graduating from high school? Enrolling in college? Graduating or completing certificates?
Are they disproportionately enrolled in community colleges? How many transfer to four-year colleges? Do they get help in making that transition?
Are colleges reaching out to Hispanic students? Are community organizations helping them get ready for college? Are high schools providing information about financial aid and grants?
How is the growing presence of Hispanic students changing college campuses? Are the changes substantive or cosmetic? Are Hispanic students funneled into certain majors?

CONTACTS
Excelencia in Education: Source for data, especially on so-called “Hispanic-Serving Institutions.”
Sarita Brown, president
703-549-5572
contact@edexcelencia.org
http://www.edexcelencia.org/hsi/default.asp

Tomas Rivera Policy Institute
University of Southern California
213-821-5615
http://www.trpi.org

New York Latino Research Clearinghouse
Teachers College, Columbia University
http://www.tc.edu/latinoresearch

Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Antonio Flores, president and chief executive officer
210-576-3214
aflores@hacu.net
www.hacu.net

Eugene E. Garcia, dean
Mary Lou Fulton College of Education
Arizona State University
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ARTICLES
“Bienvenido in Cicero, Ill.,” Sept. 7, 2005, by David Epstein. Profiles Morton Community College, a small school in suburban Chicago where more than half the population now is Hispanic, a dramatic shift from 10 years ago.

“Y Tu Mamá También,” June 27, 2006, by Rob Capriccioso and David Epstein. Looks at Hispanic recruiting efforts at California State University, including a new program in California that attempts to reach students by recruiting their mothers to attend outreach sessions.

PUBLICATIONS

http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/education/higher_education_institutions_and_enrollment/

“Perceptions of College Financial Aid Among California High School Youth.” Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, University of Southern California, June 2006.
http://www.trpi.org/PDFs/Financial_Aid_Surveyfinal6302006.pdf
Google “private student loans” and you’ll come up with more than 20 million entries, many of them offers of up to $200,000 or more to pay for college and graduate school.

Loan to Learn, the top sponsored link on Google in October 2006, offered “no hassle” loans and “pre-approvals” in minutes, a pledge touted widely in its magazine and television ads. The second link, from a startup company called Education Finance Partners, promised “$1k-$200k Instant Decision for Tuition, Rent, etc. Pay after Grad.” Another link, once again from a startup company with the intriguing moniker of “My Rich Uncle,” lured customers with a promise of up to $70,000 per year and a lower interest rate for those with good credit. Big banks such as Chase and Bank of America also are among the prominent advertisers, joined by companies with such innocuous names as NextStudent, StudentLoanXpress, The Student Loan Company and, perhaps the best known name in student lending, Sallie Mae.

The days when scholarships, grants, work study and government-subsidized loans covered most of the cost of a college education except at elite private schools is long gone. Tuition rose by 5 percent to 7 percent annually over the past decade, faster than inflation and almost twice as fast as average family income. Government sources of financial aid have not kept up. In 1975, Pell Grants covered about 84 percent of the costs of tuition, books and other fees at the average public four-year institution; by 2005-2006, that percentage had fallen to 33 percent. Meanwhile, the maximum amount an undergraduate can borrow in subsidized loans—$23,500 over four years—has barely budged since the Reagan administration.

Inevitably, students turn to private loans. In the past decade, private loan volume has grown from $1.3 billion to $17.3 billion, according to College Board estimates. (Some industry experts say it is even higher.) Private loan volume now is about one-fourth the size of the federal student loan program, and some industry insiders predict private loans will be an $80 billion business within a decade. Yet most reporters, and anyone else who isn’t trying to pay college tuition today, know little about these loans.

So, what are they? As the Internet ads suggest, these loans are marketed directly to students in ways not unlike those used to sell credit cards or mortgages. Private loans can be easier to obtain than government loans, because they don’t require filling out the dreaded FAFSA (free application for federal student aid) form, a fact that some companies highlight. Interest rates for borrowers considered the best credit risks—those with a job, without any defaults or late payments and a co-borrower with a substantial income—can cost about the same as some government loans. But students with a damaged credit record, no job and no co-borrower will pay far higher interest rates—over 18 percent in some cases—if they’re able to obtain a loan at all. By contrast, the rate for government loans to students is now fixed at 6.8 percent and 8.5% for so-called PLUS loans to parents. Moreover, the rates for the private loans are adjustable, meaning that borrowers’ monthly payments will go up as interest rates rise. The explosion in these loans has come during a time of historically low interest rates. Now, with the Federal Reserve trying to keep a lid on inflation, rates are rising. And many of the loans issued in the past five years are now coming due. As with government student loans, private education loans are not dischargeable in a bankruptcy.

Many financial aid officers are ambivalent about...
the loans. They know private loans are necessary to cover tuition, given the growing inadequacy of federally subsidized aid programs. They also know it is difficult for students and their parents to knowledgeably evaluate the hundreds of loans available, all with different rates, repayment terms and discounts. So, in what they say is an attempt to make sure that students get the best deal, financial aid offices create “preferred” lists of lenders who agree to offer loans with better terms. These lists can be found on college Web sites.

Keep in mind, also, that private loans often are taken out by affluent students whose parents simply prefer to manage their cash flow with debt rather than cashing out investments. The growth of the loans is not just a measure of need; it’s also a measure of demand.

What stories might journalists consider doing about the effects of this dramatic and recent change in higher education financing?

Take a look at the preferred lender lists at the colleges you cover. What terms did the college negotiate? The company MyRichUncle (www.myrichuncle.com) published a two-page ad in the New York Times in July 2006, urging students to ask the financial aid office about these deals. The contention is that some of the terms might benefit the college more than the students. The MyRichUncle ad infuriated many financial aid officers, because it implied that they were not looking out for the interests of students. But the Wall Street
# Resources:

## Resources for Stories on Private Loans

### Organizations

**America’s Student Loan Providers.** Good source of detailed information about federally guaranteed and subsidized loans. Kevin Bruns, executive director  

**The College Board.** Issues reports on college costs, student aid, debt and related costs. Also, through partners who are lenders, offers private loans as well as federally guaranteed and subsidized loans.  
212-713-8052  [www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)

**The Lumina Foundation on Education.** Its Web site on college costs has good background information.  
[www.collegecosts.info](http://www.collegecosts.info)

**The Institute for College Access and Success.** Robert Shireman, founder of TICAS, is an expert on college loans and is critical of aspects of both the federal student loan programs and private loans.  
510-647-4305 or 202-478-1027  [www.ticas.org](http://www.ticas.org)

**The Institute for Higher Education Policy.** One of the sponsors of an influential report on the growth of private education loans. Also home to the Global Center on Private Financing of Higher Education, launched in September 2006: a source of data on trends in private sector financing, which includes private loans as well as other private sources.  
202-861-8223  [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org)

**National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.** Members are close observers of the trend toward private student loans and offer a critical perspective on its implications. Can put reporters in touch with local financial aid administrators.  
202-785-0453  [www.nasfaa.org](http://www.nasfaa.org)

**Sallie Mae.** Separated from its roots as a government-created entity, it is now a for-profit, publicly traded company. Largest issuer of federal loans as well as private loans. Tom Joyce, vice president, corporate communications  
703-984-5610  tom.joyce@slma.com  [www.salliemae.com](http://www.salliemae.com)

### Lenders and Related Companies

**The Education Resources Institute.** Largest nonprofit sponsor of private education loans in the country. Not a lender, TERI guarantees private loans.  
[www.teri.org](http://www.teri.org)

**First Marblehead.** A behind-the-scenes company that designs loans for major banks, colleges and nonprofits.  
[www.firstmarblehead.com](http://www.firstmarblehead.com)

**MyRichUncle.** A small start-up whose founders, Vishal Garg and Raza Khan, have been critical of the practices of their much-larger rivals.  
Karin Pellman  212-444-7541  kpellman@mruholdings.com  [www.myrichuncle.com](http://www.myrichuncle.com)

**Student loan agencies** in many states now offer private loans as well.

### Reports

**“Trends in Student Aid, 2006,”** College Board.  
[www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)

[www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org)

### Experts

**Mark Kantrowitz,** publisher, Finaid. His Web site lists 33 private lenders and compares the rates of all their various loans. Kantrowitz is an oft-quoted source on student financial aid issues.  
724-538-4500  Mkant@finaid.org  [www.finaid.com](http://www.finaid.com)

**Sandy Baum,** senior policy analyst, College Board, and professor of economics at Skidmore College. Analyzes trends in financial aid and borrowing.  
[SBaum@skidmore.edu](mailto:SBaum@skidmore.edu)

**John Hupalo,** executive vice president, First Marblehead. Has a great feel for the historical trends in private lending.  
[jhupalo@firstmarblehead.com](mailto:jhupalo@firstmarblehead.com)
A generation ago, they lined up behind rows of manual typewriters, learning to type, take shorthand and record telephone messages. Today, students at venerable institutions such as the Katherine Gibbs School and other so-called “proprietary” or for-profit schools continue to prepare for office work, but they also sign up to master all manner of additional skills, from digital filmmaking to restaurant management, from computerized auto repair to game simulation programming.

The $15 billion proprietary schools business is the fastest growing segment of postsecondary education, with enrollments expanding at a rate of 7 percent to 10 percent annually, according to EduVentures, a Boston education information firm. Some 1.2 million students attend for-profit colleges, out of the 17.4 million enrolled in all of postsecondary education, according to U.S. Census data and the Center for Education Statistics. All told, roughly 1,600 companies operate about 2,500 for-profit schools.

One for-profit school, the University of Phoenix, is the nation’s largest institution of higher education, with an estimated enrollment of some 300,000 students, perhaps as many as two-thirds of them in online programs. This figure dwarfs second-ranking Miami-Dade Community College’s enrollment of 57,000. The University of Phoenix and other for-profits have even obtained the same regional accreditation as traditional colleges and universities. Most others, though, are accredited only by their own accrediting organization.

Though many of the two-year for-profit schools compete with publicly supported community colleges for enrollments, students say they are drawn to the for-profit sector by a fast pace and nontraditional scheduling that make it possible to earn certificates and degrees in half or two-thirds the time required at community colleges.

Students may also appreciate the hand-holding that characterizes the student loan application process, and they admit to being lured, in some cases, by the high-profile marketing prowess of for-profit schools. (Ride a subway in New York City and a whole world of education is on display in the advertisements.) Internet advertising in this sector is particularly intense. Some proprietary schools pursue vulnerable populations: immigrants who may lack the academic background to get through a four-year collegiate program, high school dropouts and others who have neither the money nor the time for longer courses of study.

Students at for-profits also tend to be older than average (typically in their early to mid-30s) and to be employed. They also end up as heavy borrowers, a fact that critics say reflects the high-pressure tactics of these money-making institutions. Statistics show that while roughly two-thirds of undergraduates in the United States take out loans to pay for school, nearly 90 percent of students at for-profit schools do so, according to the Institute of Educational Sciences in Washington, D.C. Students attending for-profit colleges also are far more likely to take out private loans, which can rack up interest rates of 18 percent or more. Officials of proprietary schools maintain, though, that the many loans extended to their students are the result of enrolling students with greater financial needs.

For-profit trade school education offers many hooks for education reporters who want to grab hold of...
good stories. Among the reasons to examine the topic:

Even with a possible slowdown, this will remain the fastest-growing sector in higher education and should get more attention. Immigration, for instance, will continue to generate students.

The story has a human face and can be told well through the tales of individual students. Journalists will have a strong angle, whether focusing on a student who has successfully made his or her way through a difficult trade-school program or one who has struggled to repay student loans.

During the last decade, though, and especially in the past few years, the proprietary industry in a few key states, such as New York, Pennsylvania and California, has been tarnished by schools that appear to have preyed on naive students.

There is a public financial interest through both the federal student loan program and laws and regulations affecting businesses (which these are). Pell Grants are available for for-profit education, generally up to roughly $4,000 per student per year for full-time enrollees who meet strict financial need criteria. Some state loan programs have been used to attract students. Journalists have uncovered some of these stories, and these excesses have attracted so much attention that some stock analysts who follow the for-profit sector have cautioned that a slowdown in growth is imminent.

Sam Kennedy and Christina Tostomski, reporters at the Allentown Morning Call in Pennsylvania, wrote a series in 2005 about Lehigh Valley College, a for-profit business school, that concluded that the college used high-pressure tactics to enroll students and encouraged many of them to take out high-priced private loans with an effective interest rate of 28 percent. Students complained that the instruction they got amounted to little more than worksheets and did not get them jobs. The Arizona Republic has written about lawsuits and settlements involving the University of Phoenix, in which the college was charged with intimidating and threatening its recruiters to sign up more students. The college paid a $9.8 million fine in 2004 and is now being sued for billions of dollars in a lawsuit.

Karen W. Arenson has written a series of stories for the New York Times about for-profit schools. In September 2006 she reported that a two-year school in Manhattan called the Taylor Business Institute had an attrition rate of 80 percent and that most of the classes were at a high school level or less. She reported that the school had been ordered by the state to shut down. Arenson had earlier reported on Interboro Institute, which enrolled 4,500 students across New York City, and had been accused of changing student test scores to make them eligible for grants and loans.

“While the majority of proprietary colleges provide a quality education to students, instances of poor academic practices have recently been identified, and in other cases fraud has been uncovered in a number of proprietary institutions in New York and other states,” according to a report issued in May 2006 by the New York State Board of Regents, which oversees proprietary schools. “In these cases, some students have left college with considerable debt, no degree, and little hope of being successful in the job market.” Schools are not required to report job placement rates or income of graduates.

In light of this lack of accountability, it is even more crucial that journalists dig into the issues to bring transparency to a sector that is able to use its private status to obscure its academic performance.
**RESOURCES:**

**Online Resources for Covering For-Profit Institutions**

**QUESTIONS TO ASK**

- How long, on average, does it take to get a degree at a particular college? What's the “graduation” or “program completion” rate? What does it cost? How does that compare to community colleges or to nearby state universities?
- What new programs have been added and why?
- Who enrolls? Have students who enroll graduated from high school? Is there an entrance test? A placement test?
- How are students recruited? How are recruiters compensated? Straight salary or bonuses for each student they sign up?
- What's the background of the teachers? How much turnover? What are they paid? How are they screened? How does their background compare with that of teachers at, say, the local community college?

**STORY IDEAS**

- Tell the stories of students—the services they received or didn't receive; the promises made, kept and broken by the school; students’ ability to get a job after completing a program; the amount of debt they incur.
- Look into the business—profit margins, ownership, changes in ownership, competitors, market share, recruitment, facilities and equipment (especially important in trade schools).
- What do employers say? Are graduates of the school highly regarded or disdained? Are the programs up to date? Are the schools training people for jobs that actually exist locally? How much do those jobs pay? Are those businesses hiring?
- Follow the (public) money. How much money flows into these schools from state and federal grant and loan programs?
- Follow the (private) money. Look at the Web sites of these schools and find out which lenders offer private loans to students. What are their rates? Does the financial aid office at the school push lower-cost public loans or higher-cost private loans? Schools with high default rates or that enroll students who have not demonstrated that they can benefit from college can become ineligible for public loan programs. These colleges then sometimes push students to take out higher-priced private loans in order to keep tuition money flowing.

**CONTACTS**

- **Sean Gallagher:** senior analyst, Eduventures, a Boston-based education information company.
  - 617-532-6025
  - sgallagher@eduventures.com

- **Investment banks:** Those that analyze the for-profit education sector include Stifel Nicholas; B.M.O. Capital Markets; UBS; Bank of America (education research department is based in San Francisco); and Merrill Lynch.

- **David W. Breneman:** dean, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia. dwb8n@virginia.edu
  - [http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/admin/deans/Breneman/page3.html](http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/admin/deans/Breneman/page3.html)

- **Career College Association:** The main professional association and trade organization for the proprietary college industry.
  - [http://www.career.org](http://www.career.org)

**PUBLICATIONS**

- Johanna Duncan-Poitier, “Report on Proprietary Colleges in New York State.” New York State Board of Regents: May 2006. This thorough report, filled with tables and charts, is a must-read for any education reporter who intends to cover proprietary trade schools. It offers a blueprint for the topics that can be studied and the current issues facing one state that has made regulatory oversight a top priority.

- Eduventures in Boston, “Postsecondary Institutions: Learning Markets and Opportunities 2004.” Although this report, available in PDF format, is a bit dated and some of its metrics on the proprietary industry are overly rosy, the report offers excellent background on the risks facing the industry.
Are you asking college administrators or professors how they know students are learning? If you’re not asking that question, you ought to be. Such queries can produce reams of copy for good stories. If you are inquiring along those lines, don’t be satisfied by statistics on how many students pass their classes or how many get As. Such data can be misleading—think grade inflation—and don’t address the question of whether students are prepared for success after college.

Most people assume that college graduates will enjoy advantages conferred by higher education. The statement is often made, with little thought or evidence, that a college graduate will earn $1 million more during his or her work years than will the average high school graduate. This proposition, though, is being challenged by a rising chorus of critics who maintain that many graduates are unprepared for either the job market or for graduate and professional school. Moreover, they say that some young people are deficient in life skills, unsuited for family and civic roles, and unable to adjust to the psychic demands of employment. These critics want to make higher education more accountable for student learning.

“Few faculties engage in a continuing effort to assess how much their students are learning, identify deficiencies, develop and test possible remedies, and ultimately adapt those approaches that prove most successful,” wrote Derek Bok, the former president and now interim head of Harvard University. His book, “Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More,” was published in 2006.

A rallying point for the dissatisfaction with college outcomes was the 2006 deliberations of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. In addition to finding fault with high college costs and restrictions on access, some members of the panel endorsed the use of tests to gauge the effectiveness of institutions in teaching students.

For journalists, the story takes many forms:

• Is there displeasure over how much students seem to learn at the colleges you cover?
• What evidence do critics cite to back up their claims?
• In turn, what evidence do colleges offer that students are learning?
• How do the colleges you cover monitor learning? Do they use that information to improve the quality of teaching?

The movement to assess learning outcomes has been quietly simmering for more than a decade. The players include legislators who allocate funds for public colleges and universities, employers who want graduates to be well-prepared and alumni who sometimes wonder what they got for the money that they and their families spent.

Central are questions of whether colleges ought to test students in some universal way as a measure of their learning and, if so, what kind of test to use. This is complicated, though. Keep in mind that colleges offer dozens of different majors, and even students who pursue the same major do not take identical courses. So, just what should institutions expect their students to know?

Should all students be conversant in the basics of molecular biology? Should they understand the political dynamics that shaped the map of Africa? Should...
they all have a grasp of basic calculus? Should every undergraduate be familiar with the writings of the romantic poets? Is there, in fact, any knowledge that everyone earning a baccalaureate should possess?

Questions of this sort provide an entry point for articles about the purposes of higher education, a topic that seldom gets covered. The approach to testing that has gotten the most attention from the national commission chaired by Charles Miller, a former head of the University of Texas Regents, would not inquire into specific facts. Instead, it would examine students’ skills in such areas as problem-solving, analytic reasoning and expository writing, proceeding on the assumption that these skills should be cultivated throughout bachelor’s-level study in all majors and, especially, via core required courses.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment has perhaps received the most attention in this regard and is the most widely used. It presents scenarios and asks students to read documents containing contradictory claims and then to write persuasive arguments in behalf of a course of action. The CLA, sponsored by the Council for Aid to Education, provides the colleges that use it with reports on how much progress students make in these areas over time. Some other so-called direct assessments are the ACT’s Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency and the Education Testing Service’s Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress.

Presumably, those at the most selective colleges begin ahead and stay ahead, but these students may not add as much to their reservoir of knowledge and skills during their college years as some who enter college with weaker skills. The Teagle Foundation in New York has taken a strong interest in this aspect of measuring learning, which aims to estimate how much “value” a college adds, and has given grants to small colleges across the country to explore the issue. Such experiments alone would be worth coverage.

Another category of assessments is indirect. Rather than looking at knowledge or skills, the tests ask students to report on their college experiences, ranging from participation in extracurricular activities to attendance rates in classes. The best known such assessment is the National Survey of Student Engagement, which presumes that students with the deepest involvement in college life derive the most from their education. States take various approaches to assessing college-level learning at public colleges and universities. Reporters ought to compare practices in their states with what occurs elsewhere. For example, Arkansas and Florida require students to take tests between their sophomore and junior years to measure readiness for upperclass studies. The Maryland Higher Education Commission mandates that schools report on outcomes in such areas as written and oral communication and scientific and quantitative reasoning. Minnesota and Oregon survey graduates to find out how well they think they were prepared for their jobs.

One productive route for journalists who want to find paths into stories involves asking about the learning outcomes that individual faculty members set for their courses. Professors at campuses of the University of Wisconsin, for instance, have even started posting these objectives at a Web site maintained by the statewide system. A journalist could compare those stated goals with what employers or graduate schools say they are looking for and can ask graduates about the extent to which they think the objectives were realized.

Not surprisingly, controversy swirls around the idea of directly assessing learning outcomes, a sure indication that journalists should probe this topic. Advocates of testing argue that it will make colleges more accountable and improve teaching. Opponents say, though, that no assessment is suitable for the task, and, furthermore, that much of the worth of attending college cannot be quantified.

The assessment of learning outcomes will probably not produce the kind of comparative ratings done by U.S. News, but it could offer rich information beyond the inputs—high school grades and scores on admissions tests, for instance—that underpin many such rankings. Most important, this kind of assessment could bring closer scrutiny to teaching and learning. This is a story that journalists ought to follow into classrooms.

Gene I. Maeroff is a senior fellow at the Hechinger Institute for Education and the Media, Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of “A Classroom of One: How Online Learning Is Changing Our Schools and Colleges.”
RESOURCES FOR STORIES ON LEARNING OUTCOMES

STORY POSSIBILITIES
Do professors, college academic administrators, trustees and employers in your community agree on what all students ought to learn and be able to do, regardless of major?
Do faculty members specify what they want their students to learn? How do they determine whether the goals have been met?
Do the regional accrediting agencies require colleges and universities to take some measure of how much their students are learning?
Find out what direct assessments colleges are using and then write about what they ask students to do.

CONTACTS

Trudy W. Banta: among the earliest to get involved in the assessment of learning.
Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis
371-274-5555 tba@iupui.edu

Roger Benjamin: helped develop the high-profile Collegiate Learning Assessment, which was highlighted by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education.
Council for Aid to Education
212-661-5800 rbenjamin@cae.org

W. Robert Connor: president of the Teagle Foundation, which has made grants to help smaller colleges and universities explore the value they are adding.
Teagle Foundation
212-737-1970 wrconnor@teaglefoundation.org

Harold Hartley III: oversees efforts to help small colleges and universities measure learning outcomes.
Council of Independent Colleges
202-466-7230 hhartley@cic.nche.edu

Richard H. Hersh: helped develop the Collegiate Learning Assessment and is a critic of undergraduate education.
Council for Aid to Education
203-407-1866 rhersh@sbcglobal.net

Rebecca Karoff: administrator of a university system trying to get faculty members to publicly state learning objectives.
University of Wisconsin System
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George D. Kuh: the moving force behind the National Assessment of Student Engagement.
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812-856-5824 kuh@indiana.edu

Jean O’Brien: works at one of the colleges most active in assessing learning outcomes.
King’s College
1-888-KINGS-PA jpbrien@kings.edu

Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini: co-authors of a major longitudinal study of the impact of college on students.
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University of Iowa
319-335-5369 ernest-pascarella@uiowa.edu
Terenzini
Penn State University
814-865-9755 terenzini@psu.edu

David Shulenburger: his organization issued an important report on this topic.
National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges
202-478-6040 dshulenburger@nasulgc.org

Lee Shulman: authority on college teaching who has reservations about assessing learning outcomes.
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
650-566-5100 shulman@carnegiefoundation.org

PUBLICATIONS

“Beyond the Rankings: Measuring Learning in Higher Education: An Overview for Journalists and Educators.” Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media: 2006. This primer looks at the ways experts assess and compare the quality of colleges and universities. It also provides guidance on coverage of this movement. To request a copy, send an e-mail to Hechinger@tc.edu with name and address.
The college students hosted a spring break party last March and the drinking started in the early afternoon. By late evening, the alcohol flowed at the shabby rental house near campus. One student passed out on the floor.

It was an all too familiar story, one that could have taken place on any U.S. college campus. But these partygoers were lacrosse players at Duke University, and what happened or didn’t happen at the Durham, N.C., house where a stripper claims she was raped by three players remains the subject of national news coverage.

One thing is clear: The Duke scandal has deepened fears about bad behavior and dangerous consequences when young people drink to excess.

If you cover higher education in the United States, sooner or later you will write about an alcohol-related accident, crime or death on a college campus. But to really examine the drinking culture on the American college campus, you'll need to reach beyond the story of a single, devastating binge and look at the research. Immersing yourself in the social scene and tapping into students’ drinking habits will also lead to richer, more detailed stories.

There is no shortage of national headlines about campus drinking. Before the Duke scandal, the spotlight fell on Colorado, where three students at three schools died in alcohol-related incidents during a single semester in 2004. Examples are found wherever college students drink, and that's just about everywhere.

At Duke, the lacrosse saga prompted a critical examination of the school’s “work hard, play hard” ethos. A faculty report denounced Duke's ambivalence toward drinking on campus and said the university shared considerable responsibility in the deplorable alcoholic excesses of lacrosse players.

The story has another side, though—one that begs reporters to question whether college drinking has spiraled out of control or is merely a tradition as old as universities themselves. If you ask Duke alumni, many will complain the place is downright dull compared to the good old days. Gone is a beloved campus beer joint. Freshmen live on a dry campus. Campus social events are regulated by party monitors and university-approved bartenders.

Reporters covering the issue should attempt to quantify the amount and severity of drinking on campus by asking for surveys over time, looking at alcohol-related arrests and finding out how many students receive emergency treatment after drinking. Talk to faculty about the academic toll. Do professors notice hung-over students? Are classrooms empty on Fridays?

Reporters also should also consider the research. In 2002, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in Bethesda, Md., documented the consequences of drinking for students between the ages of 18 and 24: 1,400 deaths, 500,000 injuries, 600,000 assaults and 70,000 victims of sexual assault annually.

Social psychologist Henry Wechsler at the Harvard School of Public Health began measuring drinking with his landmark College Alcohol Study in the early 1990s. Soon, every college administrator’s vocabulary included...
the phrase “binge drinking,” defined by Wechsler as five or more drinks in a sitting for a man and four or more for a woman. The survey showed that 44 percent of college students were binge drinkers—a rate that remained stable through four surveys over the next eight years.

Wechsler’s work had an enormous impact. The federal government set a goal to cut binge drinking in half by 2010. Some colleges tightened alcohol policies, offered substance-free dorms and hosted alcohol-free parties.

Determining the success of such efforts is hard, but reporters can pick up clues on the campuses they cover. Go to non-alcoholic parties and visit the dry dorms—are they popular? Is alcohol education mandatory? What are the disciplinary or counseling procedures when students violate alcohol policies? Are parents notified when students drink in harmful ways? Are colleges taking the steps Wechsler says are necessary, like policing underage drinking, curbing alcohol at alumni events and pressuring local bars to stop selling cheap booze to students? Does the school tolerate heavy drinking at tailgate events? Does the university or athletic conference accept alcohol advertising? Does the campus try to influence local businesses that sell alcohol? Are parents notified when students drink in harmful ways? Does the school tolerate heavy drinking at tailgate events? Does the university or athletic conference accept alcohol advertising? Does the campus try to influence local businesses that sell alcohol?

URI takes a stand

Reporters may also want to look at a school that took an aggressive stand against drinking. After it had been named a top party school by the Princeton Review from 1993 to 1995, the University of Rhode Island banned alcohol at campus social events, announced stiff fines for violations and accompanied the crackdown with educational programs. Attacking alcohol became part of a plan to raise the university’s academic profile, says URI President Robert Carothers. The school has since received millions of dollars in federal funding to reduce alcohol abuse and is widely acknowledged to have overcome its party image. Harvard researchers cited URI as one of nine campuses out of 140 that showed a significant decline in binge drinking over time.

Reporters should also keep in mind that disagreement exists over research on binge drinking. Critics say the Harvard study grossly overstates the problem by identifying too many students as heavy drinkers. Dividing the world into two camps—bingers and non-bingers—is too simplistic, says Aaron White, assistant research professor in psychiatry at Duke. While about 40 percent of students meet the traditional definition of binge drinkers, only about 20 percent consume 10 drinks or more in a sitting, and White believes that’s the population to be most concerned about.

“Not all students are drinking as much as you think,” he said, “but a small number of students are drinking at ridiculously high levels.”

FALSE PERCEPTIONS

In a study of 76,000 college students published last year, Wesley Perkins, a sociology professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, found that 70 percent of students overestimate the amount of alcohol consumed by their peers. That false perception leads students to drink more to keep up with what they think is the norm, he said.

Reporters covering alcohol stories may also want to contact watchdog groups like Security on Campus Inc., a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit dedicated to campus safety. The group’s executive director is Catherine Bath, whose son Raheem, a Duke University student, passed out and inhaled some of his own vomit after drinking in a bar in 1999. Days later, he died of aspiration pneumonia.

“He went off to college and he made a decision that killed him,” Bath said. “No one taught him any different. He was being a normal frat boy at Duke, and being a normal frat boy at Duke is dangerous.”

After her son’s death, Bath was stunned to see that Duke’s admissions Web site at one point featured a student-made video depicting drinking games. “As long as they send that message,” she asks, “how do they expect the culture to change?”

Reporters covering the issue must know the research and get clued in to that culture. To do that, they need to spend time with students on campus and dip into their drinking world by hitting the bars and keeping their ears and eyes open.

Jane Stancill covers higher education for the News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C. She was among the reporters who covered the Duke University lacrosse scandal.
RESOURCES:

**Resources for Covering College Drinking**

**Story Ideas**

Examine the marketing of alcohol on campus. Check out the student newspaper for ads on drink specials. Stroll the local bar strip and see how businesses lure students with happy hours, fishbowls, $1 drinks and ladies’ nights. Are there restrictions about how parties can be advertised? Does the university allow alcohol advertising in the stadium and on broadcasts?

Write about the scene. Spend a Thursday or Friday night out late, just watching the drinking behavior at parties and local bars. Do you see drinking games or students lining shots up on the bar? Talk to students (if they’re not too drunk) about the social scene and what their habits are. Be on the lookout for fake IDs and enforcement of the drinking age. Follow a group of friends, or one student, for an evening or a weekend.

Pay special attention to fraternities and sororities, where drinking and hazing are often linked. Ditto for athletic teams, especially if they live together or party together.

Talk to the police to find out the problem areas on or near campus and go there. Hang out with officers who enforce the drinking age or run a DWI checkpoint. Check out reports that often detail alcohol-related crimes and vandalism. If the reports have alcohol codes on them, there may be ways to quantify the link between crime and alcohol.

Find out about alcohol education. Ask the substance abuse counselors if you can sit in on a group session. Students are often sent to these programs after being arrested or violating the drinking policy.

Hang out with abstainers who have to put up with drunken behavior by friends or roommates. Tell the story of a non-drinker on campus on a Saturday night.

Talk to students, rape crisis counselors and health professionals about the connection between drinking and date rape, between drinking and unprotected sex.

Spend some time in off-campus neighborhoods, where some residents no doubt have experience with student parties, noise, public urination, property damage and unruly behavior. How is student alcohol abuse affecting the town-gown relationship?

**Sources and Reports**

**National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism**, www.niaaa.nih.org. Find research and statistics at:

www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov

including the 2002 report, “A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges.”

**Henry Wechsler**, director of the College Alcohol Study at the Harvard School of Public Health

www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/

and author of “Dying to Drink”; hwechsle@hsph.harvard.edu

**Aaron White**, assistant research professor, Duke University Medical Center; 919-812-3406;

www.duke.edu/~amwhite/

includes summaries of current alcohol research.

**Wesley Perkins**, professor of sociology, Hobart and William Smith Colleges and expert on the social norms approach;

perkins@hws.edu; 315-781-3437

academic.hws.edu/alcohol/

**Ralph Hingson**, professor, Boston University School of Public Health; thingson@mail.nih.gov

**Inter-Association Task Force on Alcohol and Other Substance Abuse Issues**; www.iatf.org

**Center for Science in the Public Interest** has an Alcohol Policies Project; cspinet.org/booze/

**Security on Campus Inc.**

www.securityoncampus.org
Leigh George had a simple goal: Get a college degree without ever sitting in a classroom. An infant demanded her attention at night. A nine-hour job as a paralegal soaked up her time dayside. And there was no university within miles of her home in New Albany, Miss. But Leigh had a computer and a broadband connection, tools more powerful than pen and notebook in her quest to become the first member of her family to graduate from college.

Today, four years, 60 credit hours and countless papers, e-mails and discussion board postings later, George proudly holds in hand her bachelor’s degree in liberal arts, magna cum laude. She never met a single professor or fellow student face-to-face. She never walked into the college library, attended a college mixer or ate a morsel of dormitory food. “Some days, I can’t believe I really did it,” says the 39-year-old single mom, raring to start an online master’s degree in fall 2006.

George is what experts around the country call an “e-learner,” one of a growing number of college and graduate-school students taking courses and, in some cases, earning full degrees online. They’re the vanguard of a trend so new that reliable statistics on its growth are in short supply. Some 3.1 million college students are thought to have taken at least one online course in 2005-06. All told, 63 percent of both public and private colleges and universities offer courses online. “It’s all about access,” said Burks Oakley, director of University of Illinois Online and a tenured faculty member in electrical and computer engineering. “Online education is about breaking down barriers for students who otherwise might not have the chance.” It is a growing trend in high schools, as well.

Online learning crosses state lines and international borders, and by some estimates, more than 25,000 courses are now available online – roughly 10,000 stand-alone electives, the balance of the courses part of bachelor’s or master’s degree programs. And they cover fields as diverse as business administration and psychology, engineering and pharmaceutical science. The story of online education is a critical one for education writers for several key reasons:

As the statistics indicate, online learning is now ubiquitous on the higher education landscape in every state. So the story offers opportunities to see how local universities and colleges are playing a part in it.

Online learning offers students the opportunity to pursue a new style of learning. Technology and the loosening of tuition policies so that out-of-staters pay in-state tuition if they’re learning online are two factors fueling the growth.

The online education industry is being closely watched for abuses by government officials and regulators.

Online learning has led some critics to argue that it has failed to provide students with anything more than a tedious interface for learning, no better than sitting in front of a PowerPoint lecture, while depriving them of the critical components of knowledge: face-to-face interaction with students and professors. “The challenge is to find out why technology has had so little impact on how students are taught or how students learn,” said Robert Zemsky, professor and chair of the

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What Higher Ed Stories Do the Experts Think Journalists Are Missing?

Freeman Hrabowski III, president, University of Maryland, Baltimore

Issue: Science and math

Many of us have read about the National Academies’ report, “Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing & Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future,” but few Americans understand the gravity of the issues it raises related to the science and technology infrastructure of our nation. The public’s lack of understanding about science and math education is connected to our general lack of appreciation of the complexity of public education issues in America. Most Americans do not realize large and growing numbers of students with an early interest and aptitude in math and science lose their interest in these fields between the elementary school and college years. Too few universities are committed to strengthening teacher preparation in science and math and to working closely with challenged school systems. So, just as we have not figured out how to close the academic achievement gap in America, we have not devoted sufficient attention to increasing substantially the number of Americans succeeding in the science and technology pipeline.

CONTACT: Mike Lurie, director, university relations 410-455-6380 mlurie@umbc.edu
Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania and a skeptic of online learning as it’s practiced today.

Student retention and completion rates for online courses, perhaps the most compelling measures of outcome, tell a story of mixed success. The University of Illinois at Springfield claims online student retention rates of 90 percent, almost as high as that school’s on-campus retention rate of 92 percent. But experts believe e-student retention generally hovers around 60 percent to 70 percent. E-students attest to some of the challenges: “You have to be extremely focused, checking the bulletin boards constantly because one student may post responses to questions late at night and another early in the morning,” said Julie Cramton, 37, a court recorder in Saginaw, Mich., who recently earned her bachelor’s degree online.

Providing opportunities

Frank Mayadas, a program director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, a private philanthropy in New York that has donated more than $55 million in the past 10 years to help schools develop online learning programs, says e-learning is opening up opportunities for degree and non-degree study to millions of students who would not otherwise have the chance. Student-professor interactions, he says, can be just as meaningful as at brick-and-mortar schools. “I think this is one of those very rare times when education undergoes huge change,” Mayadas said. “So you get your critics, but then you see these amazingly excited students that prove to us that something powerful out there is working.”

The main divide in online education is between institutions and programs that regard e-learning as a source of profit and those that consider it just another mode of instruction. For-profit private schools such as the University of Phoenix, DeVry University, Strayer University, Jones University and the Kaplan colleges seem to account for roughly 30 percent to 35 percent of online enrollment. Some traditional institutions like Cornell, Columbia, Temple and New York University have created for-profit online operations, but the results have been very mixed, and several such ventures have folded.

Among the many public universities that don’t differentiate between online and face-to-face classes are the University of Illinois, the State University of New York, Penn State University, Duke University and the University of Massachusetts. By some estimates, nearly all public universities have entered the online arena in some form or soon will. Such traditional schools account for about half the online enrollments.

Who is the typical e-learner? He or she tends to be a working adult, average age of 36, taking three courses a year, a lighter load than a full-time on-campus student. Some of those who enroll in online courses are students who go to classrooms for most of the rest of their schedules but want the experience of learning online; others seek out online courses to solve scheduling conflicts. Other e-learners do not live on-campus and want the flexibility to "attend" courses at times of their own choosing—during their lunch hour, late at night, early in the morning or on weekends. Normally, online students must meet the same admissions criteria as campus-based students and pay tuition at the same rate.

Leigh George in Mississippi is one of those who say the virtual model worked perfectly for her. “I had quite a different personality in those classes,” George said proudly. “I wasn’t shy, and I became a really good student. I proved to myself that this way of learning works for me.”

Contact: Tim McDonough, ACE public affairs director 202-939-9365 tim_mcdonough@ace.nche.edu

Want to keep this issue alive? We welcome your feedback. Details on inside back cover.
RESOURCES:

Resources for Covering Online Education

STORY IDEAS

Tell the story of an e-learner or a cohort of e-learners. Find an online learner, follow him or her through a battery of coursework and compare his or her experiences to that of a brick-and-mortar student, ideally at the same school in a similar course. Finding successful e-learners is usually easy; schools are only too happy to turn over the names of such students after they’ve secured permission to do so. Finding students who’ve struggled with e-learning is more difficult; ask successful students for the names of friends who struggled or simply hang out at the computer center and ask.

Become an online learner yourself. Sign up for a course and take it. Then write a first-person account about your experience as an e-learner. Track details such as syllabus materials, textbooks, message board activity, professor involvement.

Tell the story of an e-professor. Many professors at schools active in the e-learning space teach both online and in conventional classrooms. Ask them to compare their experiences.

Track statistical success and plans for a local e-learning college or university. How have online enrollments grown over the years? What about retention rates? What are the plans for the future?

CONTACTS

Frank Mayadas, program director for Asynchronous Learning, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
212-649-1649
mayadas@sloan.org
http://www.sloan.org/
The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation has funded the development of online programs at colleges and universities throughout the country. The foundation-funded Sloan Consortium maintains an incomplete but searchable database of some 800 online programs and conducts annual surveys.
http://www.sloan-c.org/

Robert Zemsky, professor, Graduate School of Education, and chair, The Learning Alliance, University of Pennsylvania. Zemsky has been critical of the quality of coursework in e-learning programs of all types.
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Gene I. Maeroff, senior fellow, Hechinger Institute, Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of “A Classroom of One: How Online Learning Is Changing Our Schools and Colleges.”
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Online Degree Reviews, a new Web site, organized by academic subject area, that allows current and former students of online courses to post reviews and rate the programs they studied.
http://www.onlinedegreereviews.org
Change and Controversy on Campus: The Tough Questions Reporters and Editors Should Ask

University of Missouri President Elson Floyd often shows a graph with two lines moving in opposite directions. One represents the percentage of the university’s budget that comes from the state. That line is going down. The other line shows the percentage that comes from student tuition and fees. It is going up.

In states such as Missouri that are reluctant to raise taxes, Floyd said it was inevitable that the two lines will continue to grow farther apart.

Floyd’s graph—the kind that often accompanies announcements of tuition hikes—illustrates a trend taking place at many U.S. public universities. As states struggle to keep up with the costs of Medicaid, K-12 education, highways and other infrastructure needs, higher education often finds itself on the losing end in state appropriations. The year 2005 marked a 25-year low in state and local funding per student, according to an annual study by the Colorado-based State Higher Education Executive Officers. Between 1980 and 2000, the share of the cost of public universities paid for by state tax dollars was cut by 30 percent, said Matthew Goldstein, chancellor of the City University of New York, the largest urban public university in the United States. Meanwhile, tuition and fees at public four-year institutions rose by 57 percent, or $1,983 during the last five years, according to a 2005 report by the College Board although tuition rose by just 7 percent in 2006, the smallest growth in four years.

Almost as soon as a reporter is assigned to the higher education beat, he or she will hear a president complain about declining taxpayer support for public universities and about a movement toward private funding, as alumni and philanthropic dollars grow in importance.

Reporters should delve into this shift in funding by tracking the amount of state support (by program, per student, including financial aid and direct aid), examining the way tuition is established, and asking what cost-cutting measures schools are putting in place. In Illinois, for example, the state sets a four-year tuition rate, so that freshmen and their parents can plan for what they’ll be paying when they’re seniors. At the University of North Carolina, the system’s board of governors approved a cap preventing in-state undergraduate tuition at the state’s 16 campuses from increasing by more than 6.5 percent a year. Such policies are likely to proliferate as politicians try to put the brakes on tuition hikes that, across the board, have been rising faster than family median income for many years.

Reporters should also look at the downside of such plans; do they encourage colleges to set the rates higher than they need just to keep them the same over four years? Some critics say they allow state legislatures to decrease aid to university systems by shifting the burden to students and their parents. Avoid getting caught up in rhetoric from state legislators portraying universities as callous, inefficient spendthrifts, said David Breneman, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Instead of simply repeating the finger-pointing, Breneman suggests reporters go out and do what they do best—find and tell the human dramas that are playing out as families are squeezed.

“Reporters need to keep the heat on, but stories are going to have to focus not just on blame but on how families will cope,” Breneman said.

It’s equally important for reporters to aggressively question schools about their tuition increases and what they are doing to contain costs, said Robert Dickeson, a former Lumina Foundation vice president who has studied college costs and served in academic posts at five universities.

How Colleges Are Coping With Declining State Support

Are they raising tuition? Cutting costs? Find the human dramas behind the numbers.

By Kavita Kumar

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It’s equally important for reporters to aggressively question schools about their tuition increases and what they are doing to contain costs, said Robert Dickeson, a former Lumina Foundation vice president who has studied college costs and served in academic posts at five universities.
“The first question is, what value are students getting for their money and where is the money actually going?” Dickeson said.

Ask universities in states where public support is declining and tuition is going up how they are keeping costs down. Are they streamlining or cutting programs, or hiring more part-time faculty instead of full-time professors? Are they trying to make more efficient use of buildings by scheduling classes all five days of the week and even in the summers? Are class sizes getting larger? What about intercollegiate athletics? Do any of the cost savings go toward lowering tuition and fees? How much financial aid is being made available to ease the burden?

What other long-term strategies—beyond cost-cutting—are public universities considering to combat declining state support? What have other states tried, and have tuitions gone up or down as a result? When governors and legislators announce they are freezing tuition, reporters should find out if the state officials have an actual vision for years to come, Breneman said. “Are they just playing to the crowd? What are the long-term implications? Be very skeptical.”

Stories about tuition increases should also examine why the cost of higher education seems to rise faster than inflation, median family income and even health care, said Patrick Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in San Jose. Callan says that while tuition goes up most sharply in years when state support drops, it also goes up when higher education gets a higher share of state aid.

More public attention is likely to be focused on tuition now that U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has encouraged the public to question prices. Her National Commission on the Future of Higher Education calls for benchmarks to make sure tuition grows no faster than median family incomes.

Ask officials at the university you cover how they plan to do this or if it’s realistic, without additional state funds. Are they considering a guaranteed tuition plan? Talk to high school guidance counselors and see if you can identify high school seniors who are thinking of shunning college in favor of work and the military because they feel they can’t afford to go. Ask high schools for trends in the number of students choosing community colleges and whether those trends parallel rises in tuition.

Reporters need to balance stories about financial hardship, the growth in the use of private loans and access for individual students with the increasing struggle colleges have to remain competitive. Schools are compelled to keep up with technology, increase scholarships and attract students by building better recreation centers, dorms and other facilities, and are affected by rising health care costs, said Sandy Baum, an economist for the College Board.

“Nobody has found some miracle cure for how you can make it cheaper to provide a quality education and still attract students,” Baum said. At the University of Missouri, President Floyd toyed with the idea of guaranteed tuition but instead pledged tuition would not increase more than the rate of inflation—as long as state support also keeps up with inflation. He also recently announced he would be cutting about 90 administrative positions and making other budget reductions to save $20 million. But whether that will be enough along with other cost-saving measures to cushion tuition increases next year remains to be seen.

What is happening at public universities in the heartland can be felt across the United States, and it worries higher education economist Morton Owen Schapiro, president of Williams College.

“Without serious containment of Medicaid expenditures at the state level, public colleges and universities will be come increasingly vulnerable,” Schapiro said.

With reduced state support, reporters must be focused on the kind of quality education public universities will be able to provide for state residents down the road.

Kavita Kumar covers higher education for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.
### Resources on Public Support for Higher Education

#### Questions to Ask

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<th>Question</th>
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<td>Are some students not attending college at all because of the cost?</td>
<td>If higher costs will mean higher debt, to what extent are students choosing different careers or taking different kinds of jobs after graduation?</td>
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<td>How are families coping with higher price tags?</td>
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<td>Are your local community colleges seeing increasing enrollment</td>
<td>Are guaranteed tuition programs a good deal for students? How have they worked? What do universities say about them?</td>
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<td>because students are not attending the public four-year college in the area?</td>
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<td>What is the impact to the state?</td>
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<td>What cost savings are the universities you cover making?</td>
<td>Has the state university you cover changed its policy to accept more out-of-state students who must pay more in tuition? Have such plans met with resistance?</td>
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<td>Will any of it go toward lowering tuition or fees?</td>
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<td>What will students gain after costs go up? Will there be new programs?</td>
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<td>Will any programs be eliminated?</td>
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<td>How will declining state support impact the quality of offerings and education?</td>
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#### Story Ideas

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<td>Talk to local guidance counselors and see what they say about the number of students who are qualified and motivated to attend college but aren’t going because of cost. Find some students and tell their stories.</td>
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<td>Take a look at private fund-raising. What sorts of projects are now being paid for by private donors?</td>
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<td>Examine programs at your university. Find out how many students are enrolled in each and how many are graduating. Ask why some survive.</td>
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<td>How much money are universities spending to give faculty time off from teaching? What is the cost? Are class sizes going up?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take a look at the actual dollar amounts coming into the university from the state. Ask for an explanation.</td>
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#### Sources

- **The College Board** publishes annual reports on financial aid and tuition called “Trends in College Pricing” and “Trends in Student Aid.”
  - [www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)
- **State Higher Education Executive Officers** put out an annual study of state higher education finance.
  - [www.sheeo.org](http://www.sheeo.org)
- **Institute for College Access & Success** assembles and analyzes various data.
  - [http://www.ticas.org](http://www.ticas.org)
- Also check out the affiliated Project on Student Debt at
  - [www.projectonstudentdebt.org](http://www.projectonstudentdebt.org)
- **National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators**
  - [www.nasfaa.org](http://www.nasfaa.org)
- **National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education** has put out various reports on affordability over the years.
  - [www.highereducation.org](http://www.highereducation.org)
Women outnumber men on many college campuses. They’re also doing better academically—making deans’ lists, graduating with honors and working harder overall, new reports show. These gender differences are especially apparent among lower-income college students.

It’s not that men are abandoning college. In fact, men are attending college in higher numbers than ever before. But the number of women is increasing at a rate faster than that for men, so women are now in the majority on many campuses.

“Women are making gains in college participation and degree attainment, but their gains have not come at the expense of men,” said Jacqueline E. King, director of the American Council on Education’s Center for Policy Analysis and author of a July 2006 study on the gender gap. “The number of men enrolled in college has increased, but not fast enough to narrow what is now a 57 percent female majority in total enrollment.”

Education policy experts are fascinated by these trends and say they warrant further study. Are poor boys simply more likely to suffer educational difficulties than their middle- and higher-income counterparts? Or is the real story one that centers on the gender gap, not on racial or income differences?

The gender gap is widening among certain student populations, and is most striking among low-income white and Hispanic undergraduates aged 18 to 24, according to the ACE study.

Critical financial, demographic and technological trends are reshaping higher education, but the media rarely treat these issues with much sophistication, often resorting to oversimplification and stereotypes. Higher education is not failing, as some critics suggest, but it is rapidly transforming into a complex commercial enterprise serving a spectrum of interests. The trends most often poorly treated in news stories include the increasing presence of African-American and Latino students, combined with the impact on these historically underserved populations of governmental cutbacks in financial aid and other assistance; the fact that 72 percent of all undergraduates today are non-traditional students who pay their own way, or attend part time or at later ages; and the increasing numbers of students of all ages who take at least some of their coursework online.
RESOURCES:

RESOURCES FOR COVERING GENDER ISSUES

QUESTIONS TO ASK

What does the data show at schools you cover? Is the picture different at two-year schools compared to four-year schools?

Is it different among older students? Do males just take longer to get around to going to college?

What are the long-term goals of men and women on campus?

What are colleges doing to address any imbalances? Are the imbalances even considered to be a problem?

Find one or two schools in your circulation area where females are gaining dominance. What has been the impact? Are male sports teams suffering? Women’s teams thriving? Are there changing demands for classes? Changes in library usage?

Talk to professors, women and men on campus. How do men and women students approach learning differently? Are women working harder at their studies? Are boys playing more video games? Do commonly held notions that boys are “slackers” while girls are more hard-core in their studies bear out in your reporting?

Dropout rates: Do local college officials see male students dropping out more frequently than female? Any thoughts as to why? Are officials doing anything to stem the outflow?

Look at faculty hiring at the larger institutions in your area. Are campuses where the percentage of women students is on the rise hiring more women professors? Are they getting tenure at the same rate as men?

SOURCES FOR REPORTERS

Higher Education Research Institute
UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences
310-825-1925 heri@ucla.edu
http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html

National Center for Education Statistics
Fast facts on a range of post-secondary topics:
http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/FAQTopics.asp?type=2
Charts and tables:
http://nces.ed.gov/quicktables/

American Council on Education
202-939-9300 http://www.acenet.edu/

Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education
The following Q and A is excerpted from an issue paper and interviews with Robert Dickeson, the former senior vice president for policy and organizational learning at the Lumina Foundation for Education. Dickeson, who served in academic posts at five universities, wrote the issue piece for the Secretary’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

Q. Why does college cost so much?

Colleges are labor-intensive. On average, 75 percent of the costs to run a college are related to personnel expenses, including benefits. Tenure has an accompanying long-term price tag that easily exceeds $1 million per person. Bidding wars to attract and retain high-profile faculty members add to college costs.

Colleges do not always have control over their personnel expenses. In some public systems, faculty union contracts are negotiated at the state or system levels. Colleges are subject to increases in utility costs that often exceed budget plans. They also incur significant expenses in administering federal financial aid, admitting foreign students and absorbing the cost of research.

Colleges are not managed with efficiency as the primary value. They maintain large physical infrastructures that often include libraries, computing centers, academic and student-oriented buildings, power plants, research facilities, theaters and stadiums. Repairs and maintenance costs are usually deferred as too costly, and the resulting cumulative impact nationally is in the multiple-billions of dollars. It is typical for colleges to add new programs—academic, administrative and student—without corresponding cuts in existing programs. There is little relationship between the costs of offering a program and the price charged for it.

Intercollegiate athletics are not self-supporting, and thus add to college costs.

Internal mistakes are expensive. Judicial awards and countless other out-of-court settlements compensate for administrative errors in personnel cases such as breach of contract, invidious discrimination and sexual harassment.

Schools are increasingly discounting tuition at great cost to attract students with scholarships and fellowships.

Colleges rely on a limited set of sources for their funding: government support; tuition and fees; gifts, grants and contracts; and auxiliary, endowment and other income. To the extent that any of the other sources shrink or contract, the difference is met by increasing tuition and fees.

Student demand can be expensive: Students are seeking costlier degree program like engineering and demanding more services and amenities.

The sheer number of students attending college has increased dramatically and therefore the costs of meeting that demand have increased.

Q. What are some of the key questions journalists should ask about college costs?

- How much is the cost going up and why?
- How are programs that have low enrollment, are low in quality, or are overstaffed contributing to rising costs?
- How much do intercollegiate athletics add to colleges’ operating costs? What about other expenses not directly related to instruction? What proportion of tuition goes to these non-student-related expenses?
- If costs are rising to maintain quality, then who defines this quality? Is it defined by how much and how well students actually learned?
• Why do other entities have to live within their means while higher education cannot?

**Q. What are some factors that affect the states’ role in supporting higher education?**

All public budgets are subject to economic cycles. State government budgets are directly related to revenues the state can generate. To the extent that a state’s economy suffers or flourishes, the state’s budget for any state service (including public higher education) suffers or flourishes.

Higher education generally has slipped in priority. States may have passed along a greater share to students on the “user-fee” assumption – that it is the student who will benefit from the education and therefore the student should pay more for it.

State officials are increasingly frustrated about institutional performance and a perceived lack of institutional accountability, and may have penalized institutions accordingly.

The states face structural revenue problems that require fixing if the state is to continue or increase its level of public services.

When setting tuition rates, states and institutions do not systematically take into account families’ ability to pay. Most states do not provide student aid in amounts proximate to filling unmet needs.

**Q. What are some factors that affect the federal government’s role in supporting higher education?**

Two key shifts in federal policy have occurred since 1965, when the Higher Education Act was signed to provide access to higher education for low-income students and justified as part of the “Great Society” of Lyndon Johnson. One is the shift from predominantly grants to predominantly loans in meeting student need. The other is using the tax code to benefit middle- and upper-income students through tax credits and other programs.

New demands for accountability by the federal government can be translated into two major areas of concern: institutions need to do a better job at assessing and reporting on proof of performance; and institutions need to do a better job of making price, cost and accreditation (or other quality validations) more transparent to the public.

Federal support for higher education now comes primarily in three ways: direct support to institutions for research, some student aid programs and direct support to students, administered through institutions.

Higher education has many rivals at the federal level, including demands for increasing expenditures for defense, disaster relief and homeland security.

**Q. What are colleges doing about the problem of high college costs?**

Most institutions have shifted their teaching faculty resources from fewer full-time to more part-time instructors. There is a debate about whether this approach affects the quality of instructional delivery and student advising.

A few institutions have reduced their reliance on tenured faculty by offering multiple-year contracts and instituting post-tenure review policies to weed out what some faculty call “dead wood.”

Most institutions make cuts in several budget expense lines (travel, equipment and library materials are typical categories), defer certain expenses, defer program additions or make other adjustments to balance expense expectations with revenue realities.

Some institutions increase class sizes.

Some are making their pricing structures and award patterns available for public scrutiny, thus reducing the mystique associated with college price and thereby

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**What Higher Ed Stories Do the Experts Think Journalists Are Missing?**

Mark Gearan, president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, N.Y.

**Issue: Idealism**

If the media start telling the story of this generation’s take on being agents of social change, they will have an abundance of powerful news. Today’s young people are equally as idealistic as their parents were in the ’60s and ’70s, but boomer pundits and social observers all too often get it wrong and send this generation an undeserved negative message. Just because reporters don’t see protest marches and sit-ins, they commonly assume that 21st-century youth are lacking in conviction and passionate action. They are engaged in volunteer activity and civic engagement at unprecedented levels. I see growing dedication to service on college campuses and in opportunities like AmeriCorps, City Year and Teach for America, as well as the Peace Corps. You’ll find this generation giving back in community food pantries, eldercare facilities, urban and rural schools and legal aid offices, advocating for lead-free homes, alternate energy sources and literacy across all age groups.

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increasing public credibility.

Some outsource functions not critical to their mission (food service, security, health care, etc.) to save money.

Some institutions enter into cooperative service delivery agreements or joint purchasing contracts with other institutions in their geographic area.

Some institutions are cooperating with secondary schools to offer dual enrollment programs and accept college credits like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and College Level Examination Program credits.


http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/dickeson2.pdf

For more information about college costs, see http://www.collegecosts.info/ a Lumina sponsored site with links to experts and resources.

Contact: Robert Dickeson, education consultant rdickeson@charter.net

Hispanics
[continued from page 11] Georgia and North Carolina, and there may be stories for you to write if you look for them.

Familiarize yourself with federal and state legislation affecting Hispanics’ ability to pursue higher education. For instance, providing undocumented students an opportunity to pursue higher education with in-state tuition at public institutions has been legal since 2003 in Illinois. Other states—California, Kansas, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and Washington—have similar provisions. If you are not yet seeing growth in Hispanic populations in community colleges and four-year institutions, be patient. This story is likely just around the corner.

Emily Sachar is an education reporter at Bloomberg News, the author of “Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach” (Simon & Schuster) and a two-time winner of the Fred Hechinger Grand Prize for Distinguished Education Reporting.
Elaine Tuttle Hansen, president, Bates College, Lewiston, Me.

Issue: Faculty challenges
The most urgent, under-examined story in higher education is the transformation of our faculty. Nothing is more critical to the fragile excellence and competitiveness of American higher education than the people on the ground, in charge of our classrooms. They must contend with the explosion of what counts as knowledge, the expansion of the canon in every field, the erosion of disciplinary borders and the eruption of interdisciplinary approaches — all of which have made it infinitely harder to acquire and sustain professorial expertise. Information technology adds yet another dimension to the skill sets that Ph.Ds must acquire, use and constantly update. The academic life has significantly less social prestige, and tenure is increasingly the privilege of the minority of Ph.Ds. The opportunities for jobs, advancement and satisfaction are so diminished.

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George Kuh, chancellor’s professor and director, Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.

Issue: Learning outcomes
Education writers can do a great service by focusing more stories on essential learning outcomes and what schools are doing to ensure their students acquire them, along with which institutions are especially effective. Student engagement is one of the key pathways to acquiring the learning outcomes essential for the 21st century. Those colleges and universities that engage more of their students more of the time in educationally purposeful activities add value to the college experience. Is it enough to get everyone who can benefit into and out of college? Shouldn’t we also expect that they actually acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies they need to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing, information-driven global economy? And just what are these essential learning outcomes?

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Nancy L. Zimpher, president, University of Cincinnati, Ohio

Issue: Lack of access
Higher education has become an essential ingredient in achieving success. A college-educated citizenry is also imperative for our nation’s prosperity and competitiveness. What goes under-reported is the sad fact that too many students will not have the opportunity to get the degree. Every nine seconds, a child drops out of school; in my own state of Ohio, only 17 percent of ninth-graders will graduate from college on time. Our culture has drifted more and more away from the belief that once made our nation so competitive—the belief that education, including higher education, was a public good that helped our society as a whole.

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Jo Ann M. Gora, president, Ball State University, Muncie, Ind.

Issue: Interactive learning
I believe the media have yet to adequately cover the higher education trend that makes the most sense for today's college student — the optimal approach to education that is now much more interactive in nature, bringing faculty, students and industry professionals together in project- and product-driven immersive learning experiences. These experiences create stronger, more relevant ties between students, faculty and industry leaders, and employers tell us they value being able to select from a pool of talented, energized students who are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century before they graduate. Reporting on this trend is important to the education community seeking new ways to engage students and to the business community looking to universities to provide relevant educational experiences.

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The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University, is dedicated to promoting fair, accurate and insightful coverage of education, from pre-kindergarten through graduate school.

We carry out our mandate primarily by holding seminars for national audiences of journalists in locales across the country as well as by publishing guides and primers on an array of education topics. The publications are available on our Web site, along with other resources, commentaries and analyses of education coverage. News organizations that regularly send journalists to our seminars include National Public Radio, the Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Dallas Morning Herald, USA Today and many others.

The Institute is named in memory of Fred M. Hechinger, a former education editor of the New York Times and a trustee of Teachers College. The director of the Institute is Richard Lee Colvin, a former education writer for the Los Angeles Times. The assistant director is Liz Willen, who has written about education for Bloomberg News, New York Newsday and other publications. Support for the Institute and its work comes from a variety of national foundations. This publication is underwritten by the Lumina Foundation on Education.

In 2007, the Institute will launch Covering America, Covering Community Colleges: A Fellowship for Journalists. This annual semi-residential fellowship in New York City will provide support for journalists—working as freelancers, staff writers for news organizations, magazines and Web sites, or as editorial writers—to help them complete in-depth reporting on the nation’s community colleges. For information, go to the Hechinger Institute Web site, www.tc.edu/hechinger.

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