

Rally against the rising costs of being a student

Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew McLeod / Guest Opinion 1:57 p.m. CDT October 20, 2014



(Photo: Special to the P-C)

After meeting with the College of Education on Sept. 24, University of Iowa President Sally Mason was asked for ideas on how faculty could help financially struggling, indebted students. She responded by claiming that half of all UI student debt is "lifestyle debt" caused by purchasing things like iPhones, iPads and laptops.

Mason suggested that faculty simply counsel students to be more frugal, noting that students were expected to be poor when she was young. (Kids these days!) However, there is another significant generational difference that Mason failed to address: the rising cost of being a student.

Traveling back in time to Mason's college days, in-state UI undergraduates paid \$610 in tuition in 1972, the year she graduated from the University of Kentucky. Adjusted for inflation, in-state tuition should be \$3,500 today, as opposed to the \$8,079 students currently pay.



Kembrew McLeod (Photo: Special to the P-C)



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lowa college students to protest tuition increase

(<http://www.press-citizen.com/story/news/education/2014/10/20/student-debt-iowa-board-of-regents-rally/17618799/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

Similarly, out-of-state UI undergraduates paid \$1,250 per year in 1972, which would translate to \$7,000 per year instead of the current \$27,408. Furthermore, students during Mason's day had much greater access to things like Pell Grants that further reduced tuition costs.

Rather than blaming the victims, Mason and her upper-administration colleagues should instead take a long, close look in the mirror. Since the early 1970s, the cost of funding upper administration positions in American colleges has skyrocketed to previously unimagined heights. Meanwhile, the budgets for staff and faculty positions have been in a tailspin for the past two decades.

Not a year goes by at UI without yet another six-figure strategic communications officer being added to the ranks, or some other associate dean/provost/etc. position (not to mention the additional staff and infrastructure that supports them).

Put bluntly, the high rates that today's students pay are the result of the university shifting operating costs from the state to the students. According to the Iowa Policy Project, tuition formerly supplemented state support, but now tuition and fees are the main source of university revenue.

In 2000, 67 percent of public university funds came from the state, and tuition paid for another 26 percent of operating costs. However, as of 2012, just 35 percent of public university funds come from the state while tuition covers 60 percent of all operating costs.

This flipped-funding model has resulted in higher individual costs of attendance in order to offset decreases in state funding. When adjusted for inflation, the average tuition across the state's three universities increased by more than 75 percent from the 1990-91 to the 2011-12 school year.

Furthermore, UI's out-of-state undergraduate tuition increased 250 percent since 2000-01, and mandatory fees for all undergraduate and graduate students simultaneously rose by nearly 500 percent. In addition to costly tuition and fees, living expenses are also a burden for many students. Yet instead of continuing to provide affordable university housing, Mason's administration chose to exacerbate the high cost of living in Johnson County.

When UI demolished Hawkeye Court apartments, which were constructed in the 1960s to provide affordable student housing, it destroyed one of the only feasible housing options for many tight-budgeted graduate students with families.

Hawkeye Court and its \$480 monthly rent was replaced with Aspire at West Campus, "an exclusive community designed to meet the lifestyle needs of today's students." Apparently, UI thought that graduate student lifestyles required "high end finishes" at the cost of \$1,100 per month.

Free-spending students could purchase 30 iPads a year with that kind of money!

Perhaps it's easy for Mason to forget what it's like to be a financially struggling student when she makes roughly \$1,500 a *day*. That is about what a UI graduate teaching assistant takes home *in an entire month* (before deducting fees or any remaining tuition).

To start a public conversation about student debt, and to show Mason that the "lifestyle debt" students carry would be more accurately labeled as "university operating cost debt," we are holding a Rally Against Student Debt at noon Wednesday near the Pentacrest.

Rather than trivializing the financial burden carried by UI students, it is about time that Mason and the Iowa state Board of Regents began advocating on behalf of students by fighting against the state's defunding of higher education.

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