

Both Sides of the Issue

Why Is College So Expensive?

A MiniGuide for Teachers

stosselintheclassroom.org

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Objectives

Students will be able to:

- state the main reason each video gives for the rising price of college.
- compute how much published college prices have changed, using a figure from one of the videos and newer data.
- categorize the costs of college by who pays them: students, families, or taxpayers.
- defend a position on whether federal student loans make college more affordable, answering the strongest point from the other video.

About This Pairing

This pairing sets *Good Question: Why Has College Gotten More Expensive?*, a news report from WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, against *Why Is College SO Expensive?*, from the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). In the WCCO report, reporter Jeff Wagner talks with students and with Phillip Levine, an economics professor at Wellesley College, who says most of a college's budget pays for salaries and that a degree still pays off. The FEE video, written and presented by comedian Andrew Heaton, argues that federal student loans let colleges keep raising their prices.

Both videos say campus building projects, from dorms to gyms, add to the price, and both point to the people colleges hire. They split on why prices keep climbing and whether the price is worth paying. The WCCO report is a local news segment under three minutes, and the FEE video is a scripted video under three minutes. Neither includes anyone who argues the other side.

The WCCO report aired in April 2022. The FEE video was posted in July 2026. Tuition, student debt, and federal aid have changed since.

Concepts & Key Terms

The following terms appear across both videos in this pairing, or in the activities that follow. Understanding them will help students follow the arguments and engage in discussion.

Amenities: Features that make a place more comfortable or appealing beyond its basic purpose, such as a college's gyms, dining halls, and recreation centers.

Bennett Hypothesis: The idea, named for former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, that increases in federal student aid allow colleges to raise their prices.

Demand: The amount of a good or service that buyers are willing and able to purchase at each price.

Federal Student Loan: Money for college costs lent by the U.S. Department of Education, which the borrower must repay with interest.

Grant: Money for college that does not have to be repaid, such as a federal Pell Grant or a scholarship from a college.

Inflation: A general increase in prices of goods and services across an economy over time, which means each dollar buys less than it did before.

Investment: Money or time spent now in the expectation of a greater return later.

Net Price: The amount a student actually pays for college after grants and scholarships are subtracted from the published price.

Nonprofit: An organization that does not pay profits to owners or shareholders and instead puts any money left over back into its work.

Opportunity Cost: The value of the next-best choice given up when making a decision, such as the wages a student does not earn while in college.

Primary Source: An original record of an event or a finding, such as a government data table, a college's financial report, or a research study, rather than an article describing it.

Public University: A college or university owned and operated by a state government and paid for in part by taxpayers.

Return on Investment (ROI): The gain from an investment compared with what it cost, often stated as a percentage.

State Appropriations: The money a state legislature gives its public colleges and universities each year from tax revenue.

Sticker Price: The full price a college publishes for tuition, fees, housing, and meals before any financial aid is subtracted.

Subsidized Loan: A federal student loan on which the government pays the interest while the student is enrolled in school.

Supply and Demand: The relationship between how much of a product is available and how much people want to buy, which together set its price in a market.

Tuition: The price a college charges for instruction, not counting housing, meals, books, or other fees.

Discussion Questions

Before watching, have students read through the questions below. After viewing both videos, use the questions to guide discussion—in small groups, as a whole class, or in writing. Encourage students to weigh the evidence on both sides before forming a view.

1. According to the WCCO report, where does most of a college's budget go?
2. Of every \$100 in tuition, how much does the WCCO report say goes toward education?
3. Why does economist Phillip Levine call college "a pretty good investment"?
4. Who does the FEE video say makes most student loans, private companies or the government?
5. In the FEE video's car auction, what happens when everyone gets a \$1,000 coupon?
6. What does the FEE video say colleges build instead of more classrooms?
7. Why does the FEE video say colleges don't simply admit more students?
8. What does the FEE video say New York Fed researchers found about student loans?
9. If college keeps costing more every year, why do so many high school seniors still choose to enroll?
10. What is the difference between a college's sticker price and the price a student actually ends up paying?
11. If a college builds a new recreation center, who ends up paying for it: students, donors, or taxpayers? Explain.
12. When the government lends a student money and the student can't repay, who ends up paying the bill?
13. If federal student loans were cut back, how would students who rely on them pay for college?
14. Does a degree pay off the same way for every student and every major? Why or why not?
15. How exactly would more government money make college cheaper, rather than just easier to pay for?
16. If colleges lost some loan money, what would push them to lower prices rather than cut programs?
17. How might artificial intelligence (AI) change which degrees pay off over the next twenty years?
18. What would a student gain, and what would he or she give up, by working for a year before choosing a college?
19. If someone can learn a skill from online videos or an AI tutor, what does a college degree still offer?
20. The WCCO report points to salaries and campus improvements. The FEE video points to student loans. Could both explanations be true at once? Explain.

21. The WCCO report aired in April 2022, and the FEE video was posted in July 2026. Which of their figures would you check first today?
22. Levine says a degree pays off "hundreds of thousands of dollars." If that is true, does it matter how fast tuition rises? Why or why not?
23. A 2026 projection found that about one in four private nonprofit colleges could face a financial crisis within ten years. If they closed, who would lose, and who might gain?
24. What is the strongest argument on the side you disagree with?

Related Resources

Teachers looking to extend this discussion may want to pair it with these resources from SITC.org:

- [Both Sides: Forgiving Student Debt](#)
- [Solving Student Debt](#)
- [Who Sets Prices?](#)
- [Lessons in Lyrics: No Such Thing as a Free Lunch](#)

Activities

The activities below may be used in any order. Each one requires students to engage with both videos. Worksheets begin on their own pages so they may be printed separately.

Activity 1: Fact vs. Opinion Sort

This sort asks students to separate checkable statements from judgments and from claims about the future. Distribute the worksheet after both videos have been viewed. Allow ten minutes of individual work, then compare answers as a class. The disagreements are the point, and the answer key notes where more than one answer can be defended.

Students mark each statement F for fact, O for opinion, or P for prediction. Remind students that a statement can be a fact and still be wrong. What makes it a fact is that evidence could settle it. Statements A through F come from the WCCO report, and G through L come from the FEE video.

Name _____ Date _____
Class _____ Period _____ Teacher _____

Fact, Opinion, or Prediction: Why Is College So Expensive?

Mark each statement F (fact), O (opinion), or P (prediction).

	Statement	F / O / P
A	The average tuition at a four-year college is now more than \$11,000 a year.	
B	Most of a college's budget goes to salaries.	
C	College is a pretty good investment.	
D	A degree will pay off hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime.	
E	Campus improvements, from classrooms to dorms, add to what college costs.	
F	Whether college is worth it depends on what you want to do.	
G	Most student loans are made by the federal government, not private companies.	
H	Researchers found that colleges raised tuition by as much as 60 cents for each new dollar of subsidized loans.	
I	Supply and demand are never optional.	
J	If the government lends students more, colleges will raise their prices even more.	
K	Colleges should build more classrooms and hire more professors instead of building gyms.	
L	The price of college has doubled.	

Pick one statement you marked O and rewrite it as a statement someone could check with evidence.

Activity 1: Fact vs. Opinion Sort—Answer Key

A = F, B = F, C = O, D = P, E = F, F = O, G = F, H = F, I = O, J = P, K = O, L = F

Where more than one answer is acceptable

D (pays off over a lifetime). Levine says this is "what the evidence shows," and studies of lifetime earnings back him up on average. But no one can know what a particular student will earn. Accept F from a student who points to the research on averages, and P from a student who points to the individual.

I (supply and demand). Economists treat supply and demand as a description of how markets behave, so some students will call it a fact. Accept F if the student names evidence that could test it. Most will notice that "never optional, ever" is a strong claim stated as a rule, not a measurement.

J (colleges will raise prices). The FEE video presents this as what will happen, which makes it a prediction. A student who marks it F and points to the New York Fed research in statement H should be credited. Ask whether a finding about the past proves what will happen next time.

L (doubled). It is checkable, so it is a fact in form. Whether it is true depends on the years compared and on whether the figures are adjusted for inflation. That question is taken up in Activity 6.

Teacher Notes

Six of the twelve statements are facts in form, and they are spread across both videos. Ask the class to notice what follows. The two videos rarely dispute each other's numbers. They disagree about what causes the numbers and what a family should make of them. If students decide one video is "all opinion," that is worth examining out loud.

Activity 2: Cost-Benefit Analysis

The two videos point toward opposite remedies. The WCCO report treats loans as part of how families pay for a good investment. The FEE video argues that federal loans are what push prices up. This worksheet puts both directions through the same frame: what is gained, what is given up, who pays, and what nobody yet knows.

Work in pairs, then compare across the room. Require at least one entry in every box. A pair that leaves "What is given up" empty for the option it favors has not finished the assignment. Every policy costs somebody something. Allow about twenty minutes.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

Cost-Benefit Analysis: Paying for College

Fill in each box using evidence from the videos. Every box needs at least one entry.

	Option A: more federal loans and grants for students	Option B: less federal lending to students
What is gained		
What is given up		
Who pays		
Who gains most		
What nobody knows yet		

Which option do the videos give you more evidence about? Is that the same as which one is better?

Activity 3: Perspective Swap Debate

Run a quick show of hands on this statement: "Federal student loans make college more affordable." Divide the class into two teams, and assign each team the position opposite the one most of its members chose. Give teams fifteen minutes to prepare their strongest case using specific points from the video that supports their assigned side, then run a structured ten-minute debate. The point is not to win. It is to argue a position well, even one students did not start out holding. Plan on one class period.

Student directions

- List the three strongest points from the video that supports your assigned side. Use figures or examples, not general impressions.
- Anticipate two arguments the other team will raise, and prepare a response to each.
- Choose one teammate to deliver the opening (two minutes), one for cross-examination (three minutes), and one for the closing (two minutes).
- After the debate, write a short reflection. Did arguing the other side change how you see the issue? What was hardest to argue?

If a team supporting the statement runs short of material, point it to Levine's argument that a degree pays off over a lifetime and to the students in the WCCO report who said it was worth the cost. If a team opposing the statement runs short, point it to the FEE video's car auction and the New York Fed research it cites.

Activity 4: Letter to a Legislator

College prices are argued in two places at once. Federal student loans and Pell Grants are set by Congress. The money that keeps public universities running, and helps set their tuition, is voted on in state capitals. Each student picks the arena that fits his or her position and writes to the officeholder who can actually act.

Make clear before students begin that the letter is evaluated on how well it engages the strongest opposing argument, not on which position it takes. "Leave the system as it is" is a permitted position but must be argued for as carefully as any other.

Letter Requirements

- Open with one sentence naming the change you want and stating your position on it.
- Cite at least one specific figure or example from each video, and name where it came from.
- Devote one full paragraph to the strongest argument against your position, stated in the terms its own supporters would use.
- Answer both of these questions: Who pays for the change you want, and where does that money come from first? How exactly will the change make college cost less, not just make it easier to pay for?

- Close by naming one specific action you want the officeholder to take.
- Keep the letter to a single page, and hold a respectful tone throughout. An officeholder stops reading an insulting letter.

Before Students Write

Have the class look up two things: who represents the school's district in Congress, and the published tuition at the nearest public university this year. The second search takes about five minutes and turns a national argument into a local one.

Activity 5: Strongest Argument Challenge

Students are often quickest to restate the weakest version of a view they dislike. This activity requires the opposite. Working alone or in pairs, students state each video's best argument in their own words before raising any objection to it. Allow about twenty minutes.

Set a rule before students begin: an argument counts as fairly stated only if a supporter of that side would nod along. Have a few students read their versions aloud, and let the class vote on whether each one passes that test.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

Strongest Argument Challenge: Why Is College So Expensive?

1. The WCCO report's strongest argument, in your own words. Not its weakest, and not the one easiest to answer.

2. The strongest objection to it.

3. The FEE video's strongest argument, in your own words.

4. The strongest objection to it.

5. Which argument survives its objection better, and why?

Activity 6: Trace the Claim

Both videos lean on numbers, and every number in them came from somewhere. In this activity, students take a figure back to the government data, research paper, or report behind it and record what the original source actually says. Plan on one class period with device access, or assign it over two nights.

Assign each student or pair one claim, or divide the four among groups and report out. Point students to the description field under each video on YouTube. The WCCO description is a single line and lists no sources. The FEE description names the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in one chapter title but gives no link, and it cites nothing for the other claims. Students should record that and go looking for the source themselves.

Students may begin with a search engine or an artificial intelligence (AI) assistant, but a claim counts as traced only when the student reaches the original source and records what it says.

Name _____ Date _____
Class _____ Period _____ Teacher _____

Trace the Claim: Why Is College So Expensive?

Take your assigned claim back to the source that produced it. Fill in every row. If you cannot find an original source, write that down. It counts as a result.

#	The Claim	Video
1	Average tuition at a four-year college was under \$4,000 about twenty years ago, and it is "now more than \$11,000."	WCCO
2	A degree is "an investment that is going to pay off hundreds of thousands of dollars over the course of your lifetime."	WCCO
3	"for every new dollar of federally subsidized loans, colleges raise tuition by as much as 60" [cents].	FEE
4	"The cost of a college degree has risen at nearly three times the rate of everything else you buy."	FEE

My claim number:

The report, data table, or study the claim appears to come from:

What that source actually says, in its own words:

Who collected the information, and when:

Does the video's wording match the source? Explain any gap.

Activity 6: Trace the Claim—Teacher Notes

No answer key is possible in the usual sense, because what students find depends on which source they reach first. What follows is what a careful search turned up while this guide was being written, in October 2026. The College Board's annual *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid* report and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) price data are good places for students to start.

Claim 1—tuition under \$4,000, now more than \$11,000.

The starting figure fits the College Board's average published tuition and fees at four-year public colleges for in-state students in 2001–02, about \$3,750 in the dollars of that year. The ending figure is harder to match. The College Board edition current when the report aired put the 2021–22 average at \$10,740. The report's private-college figures follow the same pattern: its "about \$18,000" fits the College Board's \$17,300 for 2001–02, but the College Board put 2021–22 at \$38,070, not close to the report's \$44,000. The College Board's 2025 report gives newer figures of \$11,950 for public and \$45,000 for private nonprofit colleges. A student who finds them has succeeded.

Two gaps are worth pushing on. First, the report compares dollars from two different years without adjusting for inflation. After adjusting, published public tuition about doubled from 1995–96 to 2025–26, a smaller rise than the raw numbers suggest. Second, these are sticker prices. The College Board estimates that the average in-state student at a four-year public college paid about \$2,300 in tuition and fees in 2025–26 after grants, down from \$4,450 in 2012–13, in 2025 dollars. Ask students which number a family should look at first.

Claim 2—a payoff of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This claim holds up for the typical graduate. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reported in 2021 that median lifetime earnings are about \$2.8 million for workers with a bachelor's degree and about \$1.6 million for those with only a high school diploma. In 2025 researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York estimated a return of about 12.5 percent for the typical graduate. They also found that for at least a quarter of graduates, college may not pay off, and results vary widely by major. The Georgetown figures come from earnings in 2009 to 2019, which describe workers who chose their degrees years or decades earlier. Ask students whether a payoff measured in the past will hold for someone choosing a major now, as AI changes which tasks employers pay people to do. The gap to push on is the word typical. An average across millions of graduates says little about one student's major, cost, or chance of finishing.

Claim 3—60 cents of every new loan dollar.

This claim holds up as quoted, and the words "as much as" matter. The source is a 2015 staff report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York by Lucca, Nadauld, and Shen, later published in the *Review of Financial Studies* in 2019. It found that

colleges raised published tuition by about 60 cents for each dollar of increase in the subsidized loan limit. The figure was about 20 cents for unsubsidized loans, and the effect was strongest at private, two-year, and vocational schools. Other researchers have found different results in different settings. Cellini and Goldin found in 2012 that for-profit certificate programs eligible for federal aid charged about 78 percent more than similar programs that were not. Black, Turner, and Denning found in 2023 that graduate loans raised prices mainly in programs where students were already borrowing the maximum. Ask students why the size of the effect might differ between a state university and a for-profit trade school.

Claim 4—nearly three times the rate of everything else.

The answer depends on the starting year. Comparing the BLS index for college tuition and fees with the index for all items, tuition rose about three times as much from 1990 to 2025 and more than four times as much from 1980 to 2025. From 2000 to 2025 it rose a little over twice as much. From 2015 to 2025, tuition rose about 22 percent while prices overall rose about 36 percent, so tuition grew more slowly. Ask students why someone making an argument might choose one starting year over another, and have them record the years beside the figure.

Two more worth tracing

WCCO: for every \$100 spent, "\$61 goes toward education." No source turned up that matches this figure. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that instruction made up about 34 percent of core expenses at four-year public colleges and 39 percent at private nonprofit colleges in 2020–21, but it sorts spending into different categories than the report does. A student who cannot find a source has found something important.

FEE: the government has put "more and more money" into colleges, "and yet, they've doubled in price." The doubling holds for published public tuition after inflation since the mid-1990s. The "more and more" is harder to support for recent years. The College Board reports that federal loans per full-time undergraduate fell from \$7,470 in 2010–11 to \$3,790 in its 2025 report, in 2024 dollars. Ask students whether a cause can keep working after it starts to shrink.

The payoff question

Close by asking which claim was hardest to trace, and why. Claim 3 shows that a figure with no link can still be found in the original research, along with the conditions that limit it. Claim 4 shows that an accurate comparison can change its meaning when the starting year changes. Tell students that finding a more recent figure counts as success, not as a failure to locate the original, and have them record the date beside every number they write down.