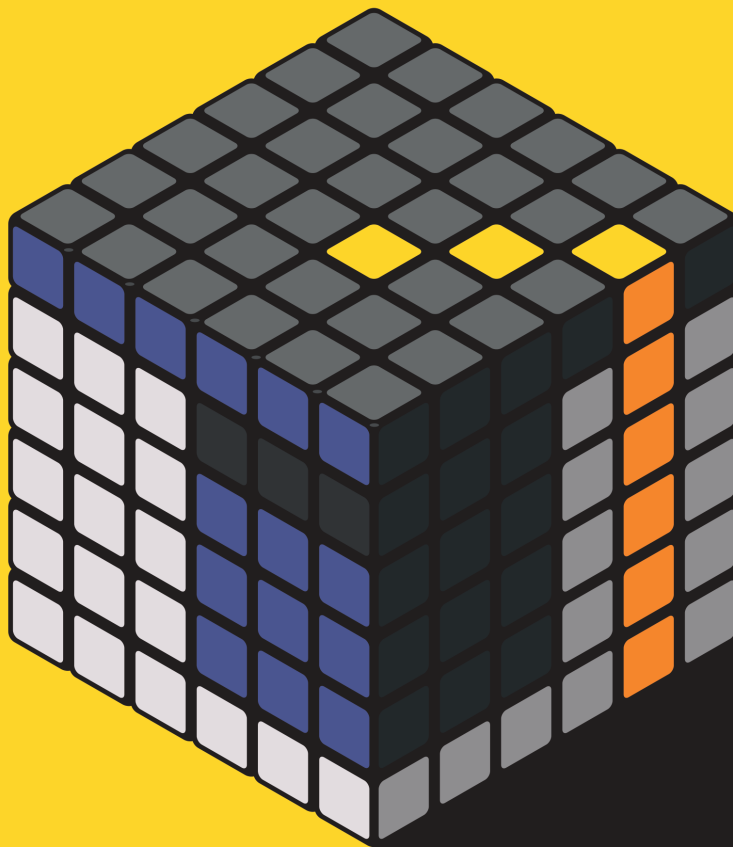


seattle

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THE PUZZLE OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS *ADVISERS SPILL ALL*



HIGHER-ED LEADERS
WHY THE STATUS QUO IS DEAD

THE HIGH-STAKES COLLEGE RATING GAME
ARE WE DOING IT WRONG?

FALL TRAVEL
VACATION DESTINATIONS





University of Washington President Ana Mari Cauce and her colleagues are still trying to digest recent Supreme Court rulings that shook the foundation of higher education.

In a matter of days, the High Court banned the use of affirmative action during the college admissions process and struck down President Biden's student-loan forgiveness plan. It represented the latest blow to institutions struggling with enrollment and funding shortfalls that have led, in some cases, to steep budget cuts and the elimination of popular programs.

Seattle Pacific University, for instance, recently announced a cut to its academic programs budget by 40%. Western Washington University has announced a permanent 3% budget cut because of declining enrollment and a federal funding shortfall that led to a \$10 million budget deficit.

"We are extremely concerned about the message that is being sent to Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander students and their families about whether they are welcome in our colleges and universities," Cauce says, speaking of affirmative action. "We have one of the lower higher-ed participation rates for these students in the nation. (And) there is no quick fix for adequately funding higher education."

The good: In some areas, the state may be better prepared than most. Washington Initiative 200, passed in 1998, already prohibits racial and gender preferences. It was upheld in 2019. The Washington College Grant (which guarantees funding to all eligible students), is among the most generous finan-

cial aid programs in the United States. And state funding for higher education has risen 40% the past five years, to about \$2.65 billion, though higher-ed leaders say it's not nearly enough.

The bad: Average tuition at private colleges (almost \$18,000 annually) is significantly higher than the national average (though it is lower at public colleges). At Whitman, a small private arts college in Walla Walla, annual tuition is almost \$60,000, according to College Tuition. And campus diversity is low. The state says only 27% of students are minorities or BIPOC, a sign that traditionally under-represented populations still don't enjoy equal opportunities.

Seattle magazine reached out to six top-level higher education officials across Washington state and asked them three questions:

What can we do to make college more affordable and reduce student debt?

How will the decision to restrict race-based affirmative action in college admissions affect higher education?

How can institutions change their funding models to counteract enrollment declines and dwindling state support?

Here are their answers, in their own words.

Higher Ed's Big Test

STATE'S TOP EDUCATION LEADERS EMPHASIZE TRANSFORMATION DURING A TIME OF GREAT UPHEAVAL

EDITED AND CONDENSED BY ROB SMITH

THE VOORHES / GALLERY STOCK



Lynne Varner
PRESIDENT, WASHINGTON STEM

On funding: This is a critical issue that needs more attention at the policy, philanthropy, and institutional leadership levels. Resetting priorities that drive budgets and working with state legislatures to ensure that what higher education offers is what states need, are just two strategies that are already happening. Also, enrollment and budgetary challenges are being experienced in markedly different ways in private, for-profit, and community college systems, so there really is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Undergraduate enrollment has been declining for at least six years. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse show a bit of a recovery from a historic drop in 2020. Students who left college during the pandemic are slowly returning and we must adapt to the changes in their lives and academic needs. Some are transferring to commuter campuses and living at home to save money and help care for family members. Others are turning to our community colleges as a smart, affordable option. We also need to redouble outreach to the more than 1 million adults in Washington who hold college credits but do not have a degree.

Ultimately, education is strengthened by a public that values its benefits. Education is not a ticket to punch but a vocation to return to throughout our lives. It is rather exciting to think of ourselves as lifelong learners.

On affirmative action: The U.S. Supreme Court decision came out while I was visiting Ghana, allowing me to process the ruling in its full historical context. My thoughts crystalized while I toured the Cape Coast dungeons that held tens of thousands of Africans, who were part of the Atlantic slave trade and the centuries-long system of slavery, segregation, and elaborately crafted, racialized laws restricting African Americans and other nonwhites from participating freely in home ownership, employment, and education, to name a few. This is not ancient history or practices done away with long ago. Racism has morphed over time but remains today a stain on the American fabric.

The High Court doesn't disagree. It acknowledges racial disparities that disrupt life and opportunity for so many. Thus, I expect higher education institutions to continue with missions valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion, and focusing on creating broad access and a sense of belonging, especially for students from communities starved of educational resources.

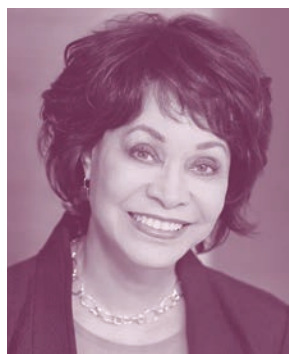
Hopefully, we'll continue to press ahead with holistic admissions, financial support for those who need it, and a sober acknowledgment that our nation is not, and has never been, color-blind.

On student debt: Education is the surest way to economic and social mobility. Tuition at Washington's public colleges and universities is priced below the national average, including at our top-tier institutions, the University of Washington, and Washington State University.

The rising cost of college and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic hit many students hard. Washington continues to address this by offering generous financial aid. We rank second in the nation in need-based grant aid (right behind New Jersey). As a result, student loan debt — and the percentage of students taking out loans — is smaller here.

Conversely, we rank low in getting students to apply for state and federal aid. We can help students reduce their financial burden by ensuring that adults who

support students are informed about the scholarships, grants, and non-predatory loans available. Many students (and adults) think scholarships are only for academic achievers, but many are based on academic interests, talent, leadership, career ambitions, campus involvement, and financial need.



Marilyn Gist
FORMER PRESIDENT, EXECUTIVE PROGRAMS AND CENTER OF LEADERSHIP FORMATION, SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

On funding: As in other industries, the market is forcing a correction. We are in a situation of too much supply. When brick-and-mortar colleges were needed to provide an education, the physical requirement inhibited constrained competition. With the advent of online education, any player could step into any market. So, instead of three MBA programs serving Seattle, we now have at least several dozen, while the size of the available student body has declined.

In response to this, the education marketplace has become very segmented as it competes for the same students previously served by only a few schools. There are more options in most markets, ranging from high-end offerings from prestigious schools to lesser offerings from schools that are not nationally accredited.

This excess supply in relation to demand is placing enormous pressure on mid-tier schools. We will see (some) fail. This is painful to watch, but probably unavoidable as the industry seeks to balance itself once again.

On affirmative action: The benefits are many: educating the next generation of women and marginalized races, providing critical voices on campus to challenge the traditional academic canon, improving competencies among students who will lead us in the future by ensuring they experience diversity first-hand in college. That said, many other universities have lagged in diversifying their student populations.

The Court's decision presents a major challenge. We should note that while the case in question pivoted on race, affirmative action has included women and led to significant women's gains in athletics, STEM fields, and so on. I expect the decision will have a cautionary effect on gender diversity, too. I expect universities that really value diversity will explore other ways to maintain it.

For example, socioeconomic disadvantage is a good proxy for diversity (and may better get at the desire behind race-based affirmative action to uplift those left behind). Colleges might amend admission requirements, for example, to invite applicants to discuss hardships overcome and consider that favorably in their admission decisions. However, those schools that have resisted diversity now have great justification for continuing to do so.

On student debt: College is not merely academic education anymore. Costs have increased in relation to the growth of other services universities provide, such as strong and varied athletic programs, comprehensive gyms, better dormitories and dining facilities, broader counseling services for mental health as well as career placement.

Because parents shop for the "best colleges" for their children, schools have had to increase these ancillary offerings to attract them. Make no mistake: consumers then pay for all the extras in higher tuition. I'd love to see a "back to basics" approach, which could bring down costs dramatically. The telling question is whether there is market demand for schools that would emphasize core education with fewer bells and whistles.



Wolf Leigh
FORMER UW-BOTHELL CHANCELLOR

On student debt: Pursuing an undergraduate degree often means taking on significant financial responsibility, but it can be viewed as an investment in your future career. Some colleges charge over \$60,000 in tuition and fees alone, and with added expenses like room and board, the total cost may exceed \$100,000 per year.

On average, Washington residents graduate with \$35,000 in student loan debt. If the cost is the most important factor to you, consider attending a (free) community college for the first two years before transferring to a bachelor's program. This approach allows you to control expenses, though transferring into competitive degree programs is not always guaranteed, and you might not get the four-year college experience or amenities at a community college.

Use cost calculators for each school to determine your actual expenses as tuition discounts and financial aid opportunities vary between institutions. Ultimately, carefully weigh the cost and experience trade-offs when choosing the right path to a four-year degree.

On funding: For not-for-profit institutions, revenue can be simplified into three major categories: tuition (enrollment), research overhead, and donations/endowment. Teaching-focused institutions typically have lower research overhead, and private institutions do not receive revenue from state appropriations.

Before the Great Recession of 2009, many states supported public institutions at 70% of the total revenue. However, this ratio has reversed drastically, with a 30-70 split between state support and tuition revenue. To compensate for revenue loss, public universities had to heavily rely on tuition fees. While Northeast and Midwest institutions experienced significant enrollment decline, West Coast and Sunbelt states have not. Nevertheless, the demographics of college-going students are projected to decline starting in 2025.

Private institutions, without state support, have managed finances through tuition and gifts. Examining their longitudinal tuition increases offers insight into the real cost of higher education. To address the challenges, state funding should be adjusted for inflation and increased beyond prerecession levels, or the expectations for higher education need adjustments.

Universities can either continue or accelerate tuition increases, making affordability increasingly difficult, (or) increase class sizes, affecting the student learning experience. Exploring diversified revenue sources may interfere with the core mission of teaching and mentoring students. Higher education grapples with the "iron triangle" of access and affordability, attainment, and quality while striving to do more with less.

On affirmative action: While Washington is one of nine states that have prohibited race-based college admission through Initiative 200, the recent Supreme Court ruling perpetuates institutional racism and inequities, despite acknowledging their existence.

Throughout history, the privileged class has set the rules in colleges and universities. Underrepresented communities, primarily along racial lines, often lacked opportunities to participate in advanced placement, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, which privileged students take for granted. In a holistic admissions review, the recent

FROM LEFT: STUDIO B PORTRAITS, INGRID PAPE-SHELDON

COURTESY OF WOLF LEIGH

ruling raises questions about whether universities can consider the barriers Black and Brown students have overcome. It also raises concerns about the acceptance of alumni legacies at private universities without contest. While some privileged groups receive special consideration, underrepresented groups are barred from affirmative consideration, creating moral ambiguity.

Allocating more resources to those underserved and marginalized communities would help those less able to afford higher education. By embracing such initiatives, we can strive toward a more equitable educational landscape.



Sarah Bolton
PRESIDENT, WHITMAN COLLEGE

On student debt: There are two things we can do to make college more affordable and accessible. The first is to increase the financial aid available to students from low- and middle-income families. The other crucial part of scholarship aid comes from states and the federal government. Increasing the Pell Grant — a federal program that, unlike a loan, doesn't need to be repaid — along with state grants such as the Washington College Grant, available to low- and middle-income families, is a critical part of improving college affordability. The Pell Grant has not kept pace with rising college costs and living expenses.

The other key step we can take is to increase financial transparency. The financial aid system can be complex to navigate, and families often don't know what to

expect in advance. Whitman is one of just a few colleges to offer a financial aid guarantee for families, so they can get an accurate sense of the financial aid they will receive even before they apply. This kind of transparency has been called for nationally.

On affirmative action: The Court's decision sends a very mistaken message to students of color — that they may not “deserve” a place in higher education, and that there is no need to redress the lasting effects of hundreds of years of racial exclusion and injustice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The challenges of the future will require leaders from every experience and perspective. Diverse campus communities, and campuses that are genuinely welcoming for all students, are both a moral imperative and crucial to our mission of student learning, thriving, and preparation for lives of purpose.

The Court's message may (also) discourage some students from even considering college. In the wake of the Court's decision, colleges and universities are called to redouble their efforts to become places that are ever more excellent, diverse, and equitable, while following the law. That means sending admissions staff to reach out to and visit high schools that represent the broad diversity of our nation, making strong financial aid a top priority, ensuring that our campuses provide excellent experiences for all students, and being honest with ourselves about places we need to change.

On funding: Our students have lived through unprecedented times, and they are thinking about their futures in new ways. In the long run, making educational opportunity work financially will call for collective efforts across higher education, state and federal government, and private philanthropy. These are the kinds of shared investments that were crucial to the progress of the United States 50 years ago, and that our students and our country deserve today.



Ana Mari Cauce
PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

On affirmative action: Public and private universities will be affected differently, and the effects will also vary widely by state, but the UW, and most of our peers, remain firmly committed to creating opportunity and expanding access to a world-class education for students from all backgrounds, which is central to our public mission.

For us, I-200 already bars the use of race in admissions for public universities in the state of Washington, so we expect the impact on our admission process to be relatively small. At the moment, we are carefully reviewing the ruling to understand what, if any, impacts it will have on public universities in our state.

On student debt: Student debt is a real burden, but there are pathways to an affordable bachelor's degree that can lead to higher earnings over (students') lifetimes (studies show those with degrees earn more than \$1 million over the course of their lifetimes than those who never graduated college).

A bachelor's degree is within reach for most students attending their state public institutions, especially here in Washington, a national leader in affordability through the Washington College Grant. The Husky Promise also ensures that students eligible for the Washington College Grant pay no tuition at the UW — 40,000-plus students have benefited in the last decade. Overall, about 70% of UW under-

graduates leave with no known debt, and the average debt for those who do owe is around \$20,000 — which is likely to be offset by increased earnings.

To keep college affordable, the federal government must continue investing in programs like the Pell Grant, which supports social mobility and is good for our whole society. States must also invest in their own state colleges or universities. Private philanthropy is also key. Finally, we must better communicate to families the “net price” — or true cost — of college attendance, which varies widely by student. The UW provides a net price calculator.

The majority of student debt is actually for graduate and professional degrees, and there should be more support for these skilled professionals who serve the public good, like health care workers and teachers. For example, donors have created endowments to enable low-income students to attend medical school, and I support federal “loan repayment,” whereby a portion of the loan is forgiven for individuals who practice in underserved communities.

On funding: States would be wise to reinvest in public colleges and universities because they pay huge dividends in education, discovery, innovation, community service, and economic impact. The UW alone creates an annual economic impact of \$15.7 billion in the state of Washington, compared to the state's investment of just over half a billion dollars.

It's true that demographic trends mean that there is a drop-off in college-age students, and depending on the state, some degree of consolidation may be necessary, similar to what we are seeing in K-12 education. However, in states like ours, where participation in higher education is especially low, we need to do more to ensure that every K-12 student has the opportunity to prepare to earn a post-high school credential.

Many students are missing out on opportunities to expand their horizons and their economic prospects because they aren't prepared or encouraged to consider college as an option. Higher ed

should also be thinking broadly about funding sources — including philanthropy and industry, because our institutions are engaged across all these sectors, working to address the most pressing and complex challenges of our time.



Kirk Schulz
PRESIDENT, WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

On affirmative action: WSU, like many of our colleagues statewide, focused on diversifying the applicant pool following the 1998 affirmative action ban. We've made it easier to apply to and attend college, particularly for low-income students. We and most other public universities in Washington guarantee admission to high school students with GPAs of 3.0 or higher at the end of their junior year who also meet statewide academic standards. Dozens of school districts statewide work with us to help make sure their students are aware of the higher education opportunities and assistance that are available.

On student debt: More work is always needed, but the state of Washington offers some of the nation's most generous student aid programs, and the actual numbers for WSU might be surprising. Three out of four students receive some form of financial aid. Of those, more than two-thirds (69%) receive grant or scholarship aid that does not need to be repaid. More than a third of students (37%) pay no tuition at all.

We believe we can do even better by convincing more students and their families to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid each year. Known as the FAFSA, this is what determines eligibility for many college aid programs, yet the percentage of FAFSA submissions from high school seniors in Washington is among the lowest in the nation. Plus, many who might be ineligible for federal aid still can qualify for state-provided assistance.

Half of all our students graduate with no student loan debt. Of those who do take out loans, their total student debt upon graduation averages \$23,708. To put that into perspective, their total debt for a college degree is less than the average cost of a reliable used car.

On funding: It's absolutely true that we have become more reliant on donor support to fund some core operations and activities, as Great Recession-era reductions have not been reversed. We have been fortunate that industry in particular has seen the value in funding endowments that provide ongoing support for core positions to enhance education and research that otherwise wouldn't exist. Our state has generously funded affordability and workforce development initiatives since the Great Recession.

Declining college attendance is a fiscal problem, not just for institutions but a workforce problem for employers and an equity problem for society at large. As our population changes, we have to help more low-income students and students from underrepresented backgrounds access and earn a postsecondary credential of some kind. We have got to stop putting up barriers by saying college is too expensive.

The data bear out that employment and earnings consistently rise the more education you have. The price of this kind of social mobility is a bargain in Washington. Helping more students get a credential is going to solve a lot of problems, and not just for institutions of higher education. **3**

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF SARA BOLTON, COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

WSU PHOTO SERVICES