

"Opening the College Gates"
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In a campaign dominated by war and terrorism, voter anxieties about college affordability didn't get much of an airing until last week's presidential debate. In several brief but heated exchanges, Sen. John Kerry accused President Bush of underfunding aid programs, while Bush touted college access as one of the top priorities of his economic plan. On one thing, though, everyone seems to agree: Going to college just keeps getting more expensive.

Average tuition at a four-year public school, at \$4,694, has risen by more than twice the rate of inflation since 1979. Private college tuition averages \$19,710; when room and board are factored in, the price tag often approaches \$40,000 at elite schools. In the past three years alone, with state budget cuts leaving many universities high and dry, public school tuition has jumped 38 percent.

But while both candidates have offered an array of new financing plans, many analysts worry that neither man's proposals will come close to what is necessary to make college more accessible and affordable for everyone. The central problem is that while costs have skyrocketed--the latest tuition numbers from the College Board are due out this week--student aid has severely lagged. Federal Pell grants, for example, a \$12.6 billion program that helps more than 4.5 million low-income students pay for college, have actually decreased in real terms. In 1979, a Pell covered 77 percent of tuition at a public university. Today, it covers only 40 percent. Rising prices and lower aid ratchet up financial pressure on families: In New Jersey, for instance, tuition and room and board at a four-year public college would have soaked up 24 percent of an average family's income in 1994--and 34 percent a decade later.

The result of these trends: Though overall attendance rates have grown significantly over the past few decades, low-income students remain severely underrepresented on campus. According to one recent estimate, 80,000 to 140,000 qualified students from low-income families don't even try to go to college each year because they don't think they can afford it. Unless drastic action is taken, says

David Breneman, a financial aid expert and dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, that number will only get bigger: "For the first time since World War II, we're actually facing the possibility of going backward."

Both candidates say they're committed to tackling the problem. Pell grant spending did rise substantially after Bush came into office, but the increase was due primarily to the slow economy pushing a million more students under the program's \$40,000 income threshold, straining its budget. As a result, Bush's campaign promise to substantially boost the maximum grant didn't go far; it rose only from \$3,750 to \$4,050. If re-elected, Bush pledges to increase student aid by 6 percent and will try to link federal aid more closely to academics by offering a \$1,000 scholarship to Pell recipients who take college-prep classes in high school, along with \$5,000 more in aid to students who study math and science in college.

Kerry, for his part, plans to give tax credits on the first \$4,000 of tuition to all college students whose parents earn less than \$100,000. The credit would cover 100 percent of the first \$1,000 and 50 percent of the rest--essentially functioning as an extra \$2,500 Pell grant. In an effort to curb runaway tuition hikes, he also proposes putting up \$10 billion for states that keep tuition increases below the inflation rate for two years. He's also suggested a \$3.2 billion public service program that would offer high school students the chance to earn the equivalent of their state's four-year public college tuition in return for two years of community service after graduation.

Appealing as they sound, though, both candidates' plans have drawn criticism. Kerry's \$200 billion proposal may not be funded at all, since it's dependent on a rollback of Bush's tax cuts for those making over \$200,000. Bush, meanwhile, is merely fine-tuning Pell grants, Breneman complains. "I don't know that any of it is bad policy, but I view it as tinkering around the edges." Some analysts are surprised neither platform focuses on expanding the income threshold that determines eligibility for the maximum Pell award, the first step toward easing tuition burdens recommended recently by a nonpartisan congressional advisory committee. As for raising grant amounts, both campaigns point fingers at Congress, which hasn't increased awards in two deficit-ridden years. "We're back to a budget-

driven policy process," says Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Clogged pipeline. Still, money isn't the only issue in higher education. A Bush campaign document notes that while tuition is rising, actual costs to students and parents, once financial aid is factored in, are increasing more slowly than sticker prices. Preparation, too, both campaigns say, is key to improving access. Studies show only 56 percent of those who enter college actually graduate. And the kids in the pipeline aren't doing much better. A report released last week found that just 22 percent of the 1.2 million high school students who took the ACT college admissions test were fully prepared for college-level coursework in English, math, and science. Only about a third of kids who enter high school graduate "college ready," according to another study published by the Manhattan Institute. "It's not that they don't have the money," maintains author Jay Greene. "What's limiting demand is that most people don't meet the minimal threshold for even applying to a four-year college."

Both Bush and Kerry have outlined plans for improving high school preparation, of course, and their college funding strategies may help some cash-strapped low- and middle-income kids. But more systemic change may be elusive. Tuition, for example, will most likely continue to run rampant until colleges are forced into a competitive marketplace where controlling costs is paramount--instead of today's arms race for high-end facilities and prestige, says Anthony Carnevale, a senior fellow at the National Center on Education and the Economy. Right now, "there's no economic predator out there in the woods," he says, in part because Congress, not banks, sets interest rates on student loans.

What's more, the aid system has gotten so confusing, according to one recent report, that 850,000 low- and moderate-income kids who are eligible for federal funding don't even complete the form needed to receive it. "This problem is too big for a campaign. It requires a level of sophistication that gets past . . . bumper stickers," says Carnevale. "What we need to do is reorganize the system." How to do that? Well, that's another matter, one neither presidential contender has broached so far.

Explanation: This article should prove challenging to students because it is long, and because several of its premises need to be inferred. For example, the second part of the conclusion, “and there is no viable plan to fix the problem,” comes from an overall critique that neither Bush nor Kerry present plans that will solve the problem of rising tuition costs. The argument map could be much more developed than the one that I have presented below. I separated the reasons on the page for the sake of visibility.

