

[See this page in the course material.](#)

Learning Outcomes

- Examine teacher training, affirmative action, and the cost of education as contemporary issues in education

Teacher Training

Schools face the difficult issue of measuring teacher effectiveness. For example, most high school teachers perceive students as being prepared for college, while most college professors do not see those same students as prepared for the rigors of collegiate study. Some feel that this is due to primary and secondary-level (i.e., high school) teachers being unprepared to teach, as many teachers in the United States teach subjects that are outside their own field of study. This is not the case in many European and Asian countries. Only eight percent of United States fourth-grade math teachers majored or minored in math, compared with 48 percent of math teachers in Singapore. Further, students in disadvantaged American schools are 77 percent more likely to be educated by a teacher who didn't specialize in the subject matter than students who attend schools in affluent neighborhoods (Holt, McGrath, and Seastrom 2006). Consequently, there are two broad structural problems in regards to teacher training in the United States: first, teachers are, according to some, underprepared to teach students due to a discrepancy between their academic preparation and their professional expectations; second, better-prepared teachers are more likely to be found in wealthier neighborhoods, further contributing to already existing educational inequality.

Social Promotion

Social promotion is another issue identified by sociologists. This is the concept of passing students to the next grade regardless of whether they've met the standards for that grade. Critics of this practice argue that students should never move to the next grade if they have not mastered the skills required to "graduate" from the previous grade. Proponents of the practice question what a school is to do with a student who is three to four years older than other students in his or her grade, saying this creates more pressing issues than the practice of social promotion. Others are more concerned about the social consequences of holding students back, and about the social development of older students who would be surrounded by younger students.

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action has been a subject of debate, primarily as it relates to the admittance of college students. Opponents suggest that, under affirmative action, minority students are given

greater weighted priorities for admittance. Supporters of affirmative action point to the way in which it grants opportunities to students who are traditionally done a disservice in the college admission process.

WATCH IT

Affirmative action seeks to address racial/ethnic inequality in higher education, and is a heavily contested topic in education debates.



[Video Link](#)

Rising Student Loan Debt

In a growing concern, the amount of college loan debt that students are taking on is creating a new social challenge. As of 2018, the average debt of students with loans was \$37,172^[4] upon graduation, leaving students hard-pressed to repay their education while earning entry-level wages, even at the professional level (Lewin 2011). With the inconsistent state of unemployment since the 2008 recession, jobs are often scarce, making student debt more burdensome, and in some cases, unserviceable. As recent graduates find themselves unable to meet their financial obligations, all of society is affected.

Try It

Allowing a student to move to the next grade regardless of whether or not they have met the requirements for that grade is called _____.

☐ socialization

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Is College Worth It?



Figure 1. Students who do graduate from college are likely to begin a career in debt. (Photo courtesy of Kevin Dooley/flickr)

“What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves” (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). David Simon, in his book *Social Problems and the Sociological Imagination: A Paradigm for Analysis* (1995), points to the notion that social problems are, in essence, contradictions—that is, statements, ideas, or features of a

situation that are opposed to one another. Consider then, that one of the greatest expectations in U.S. society is that to attain any form of success in life, a person needs an education. In fact, a college degree is rapidly becoming an expectation at nearly all levels of middle-class success, and not merely an enhancement to our occupational choices. As you might expect, the number of people graduating from college in the United States continues to rise dramatically.

The contradiction, however, lies in the fact that the more necessary a college degree has become, the harder it has become to acquire one. The cost of getting a college degree has risen sharply since the mid-1980s, while government support in the form of Pell Grants and distributed tax revenue has decreased. The net result is that those who do graduate from college are likely to begin a career in debt. In 2013, the average of amount of a typical student's loans amounted to around \$29,000. As of 2018, it was over \$37,000.^[2] Added to that is that employment opportunities have not met expectations. The *Washington Post* (Brad Plumer May 20, 2013) noted that in 2010, only 27 percent of college graduates had a job related to their major. The business publication Bloomberg News stated that among twenty-two-year-old degree holders who found jobs in the past three years, more than half were in roles not even requiring a college diploma (Janet Lorin and Jeanna Smialek, June 5, 2014), making people wonder if college really does pay off in the professional world (see Figure 2).^[3]

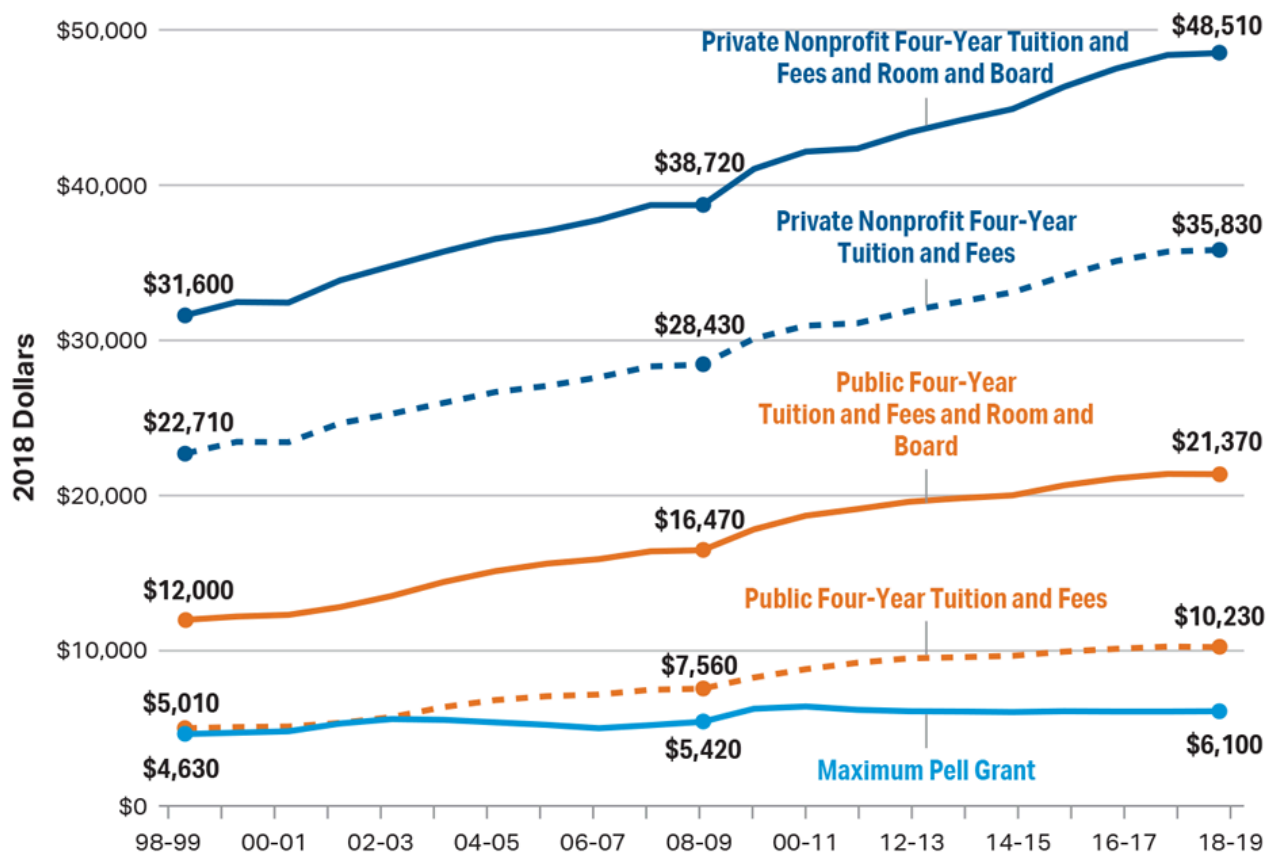


Figure 2. As can be seen by the trend in the graph, while the Federal Pell Grant maximum has risen slightly between 1976 and 2018, it has not been able to keep pace with the total cost of college.

Is a college degree still worth it? All this is not to say that lifetime earnings among those with a college degree are not, on average, still much higher than for those without (higher educational attainment does, on average, translate into higher wages). But even with unemployment among degree-earners at a low of 3 percent, the increase in wages over the past decade has remained at a flat 1 percent. And the pay gap between those with a degree and those without has continued to increase because wages for the rest have fallen (David Leonhardt, New York Times, The Upshot, May 27, 2014).

But is college worth more than money?

Generally, the first two years of college are essentially a liberal arts experience. The student is exposed to a fairly broad range of topics, from mathematics and the physical sciences to history and literature, the social sciences, and music and art through introductory and survey-styled courses. It is in this period that the student's world view is, presumably, expanded. Memorization of raw information still occurs, but if the system works, the student now looks at the larger world in broader, more knowledgeable contexts. Then, when he or she begins the process of specialization, it is with a much broader perspective than might otherwise be the case. This additional "cultural capital" can further enrich the life of the student, enhance his or her ability to work with experienced professionals, and build wisdom upon knowledge. Two thousand years ago, Socrates asserted, "The unexamined life is not worth living." The real value of an education, then, is to enhance our skill at self-examination, and not merely to develop tangible skills.

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1. Hess, Abigail (2018). "Here's how much the average student loan borrower owes when they graduate." CNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/15/heres-how-much-the-average-student-loan-borrower-owes-when-they-graduate.html>. __
 2. Hess, Abigail (2018). "Here's how much the average student loan borrower owes when they graduate." CNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/15/heres-how-much-the-average-student-loan-borrower-owes-when-they-graduate.html>. __
 3. The College Board, Trends in College Pricing 2018, Table 2 online; U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid Data Center. __

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