



TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

# RESEARCH

MARCH 2021

by Thomas Lindsay, PhD  
*Distinguished Senior Fellow of  
Higher Education & Constitutional  
Studies*

Andrew Gillen, PhD  
*Senior Policy Analyst  
Next Generation Texas*

Lucy Meckler  
*Campaign Manager  
Next Generation Texas*

## Higher Education Reality Check 2021

### Executive Summary

*Note: For the past 8 years, the Texas Public Policy Foundation has updated this primer in preparation for each upcoming session of the Texas Legislature. This edition addresses the 87th Texas Legislature, which convened in January 2021.*

While Texas's debate over public higher education has garnered a great deal of state press coverage in the last decade, this is by no means a Texas issue alone.

As the statistics below demonstrate, skyrocketing tuitions and student-loan debt, suppression of free speech and debate, as well as poor student learning and administrative bloat, signal a deep, systemic crisis in higher education, both in Texas and nationally.

This crisis will never be successfully addressed until the realities detailed below become public knowledge—and then inform public policy.

### Key Points

- While many believe that funding for higher education has been cut, from 1980 to 2019, Texas's inflation-adjusted higher education funding increased by over \$2,000 per student.
- Tuition prices and student loan debt have increased dramatically, with devastating effects for Texas students.
- The lowest levels of taxpayer support go to the schools that enroll the highest percentage of low-income and minority students—the fastest growing segments of the population.
- Across the country, including Texas, an alarming number of universities are suppressing free speech.

### Reality Check #1

***Across the country, including Texas, universities are suppressing free speech.***

Freedom of expression and free speech are under attack in higher education. The nonpartisan higher-education watchdog organization the Foundation for Individual Right in Education (FIRE) tracks instances in which universities fail to protect the constitutional rights of students and faculty and/or fail to uphold promises made at the institutional level, such as the school's mission statement. Universities that respect free speech rights earn a green-light rating, universities that partially respect rights earn a yellow-light rating, and universities that do not respect student and faculty rights earn a red-light rating.

FIRE's database evaluated several Texas universities, and only one (Texas A&M University – College Station) earned a green light; 13 earned a yellow light. Unfortunately, there were 6 universities in Texas—Rice University, University of Houston, University of Houston-Downtown, University of Texas at Arlington, University of Texas at Austin, and University of Texas at Dallas—that received a red-light rating for failing to respect free speech rights of students and faculty ([Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 2020](#)).

### Reality Check #2

***Tuition prices and student loan debt have increased dramatically.***

Over the past 20 years, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that the inflation-adjusted average annual cost for in-state students of attending a public 4-year college in Texas increased by 80%, from \$10,400 in 1998-99 to \$18,799 in 2018-19 (NCES, [2000](#); [2019](#)). This increase has led to more student debt, with the typical Texas borrower now owing \$27,000 ([Institute for College Access and Success, 2019](#)).

*continued*

### Reality Check #3

***Despite claims that it was impossible, Texas successfully launched a \$10,000 degree.***

In his 2011 State of the State Address, then-Texas Governor Rick Perry issued a bully-pulpit challenge to the Lone Star State's public universities. He asked them to create bachelor's degree programs that cost no more than \$10,000 in tuition, fees, and books. Perry advised schools to reduce costs through offering some classes online as well as through awarding course credits based on competencies acquired outside the classroom, such as during military service or previous employment. The governor did not ask that the price for the new degrees total no more than \$10,000 for only *one academic year*, but rather, for *the full four years* of a bachelor's degree program.

Three years later, three higher education partners—Texas A&M University-Commerce, South Texas College, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)—launched a program that fully met the governor's vision: the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) Program, Texas' first public university bachelor's degree combining online learning and competency-based standards. Its new degree in organizational leadership can cost as little as \$750 per term and allows students to receive credit for as many course competencies as they are able to master ([Klein-Collins & Glancey, 2015](#)).

Although the program aims first at returning adults, those entering with no previously earned credits can acquire their degree in 3 years at a total cost of between \$13,000 and \$15,000. At the other end of the spectrum, adults entering with 90 credit hours already earned can finish their degree in as little as a year and at a total cost of between \$4,500 and \$6,000 ([Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2015](#)).

### Reality Check #4

***Public opinion of higher education is declining.***

A 2019 Pew survey found that the share of the population that said higher education had a positive influence on the country declined from 60% in 2012 to 50% in 2019. The share saying it has a negative influence increased from 26% to 38% ([Parker, 2019](#)).

### Reality Check #5

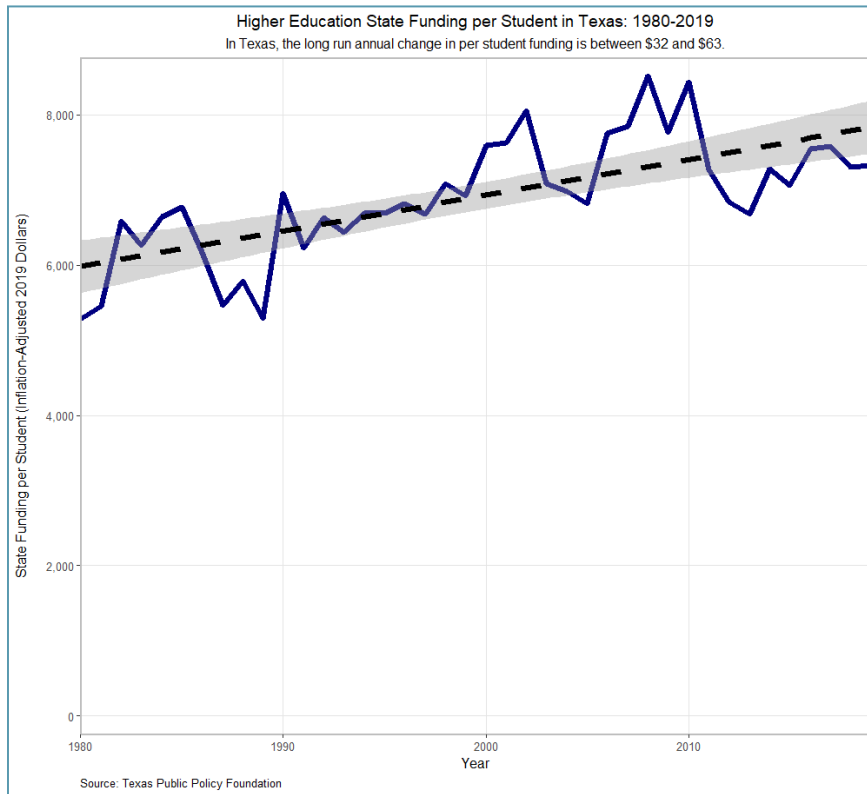
***While many believe that funding for higher education has been cut, state funding actually increased by over \$2,000 per student in the last 4 decades.***

After adjusting for inflation, the annual *State Higher Education Finance* report shows that funding for Texas public colleges has not fallen ([Gillen, 2020](#)). In fact, as shown in **Figure 1**, state funding per student increased by more than \$2,000 from 1980 to 2019. The long-term trend shows a typical increase of \$32 to \$63 (the shaded region of the figure) per student per year. Needless to say, tuition does not need to rise to make up for state funding cuts when state funding has gone up instead of down. Yet universities still raised tuition, with net tuition revenue increasing by over \$4,000 from 1980 to 2019.

### Reality Check #6

***College graduates are learning little.***

The landmark book *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2010) employed the Collegiate Learning Assessment to measure what undergraduates learn after 4 years invested in college. The study's findings are alarming:

**Figure 1***Higher Education State Funding per Student in Texas: 1980-2019*

- 36% of students did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning over 4 years in college (p. 121).
- “Growing numbers of students are sent to college at increasingly higher costs, but for a large proportion of them, the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically non-existent” (p. 121).

## Reality Check #7

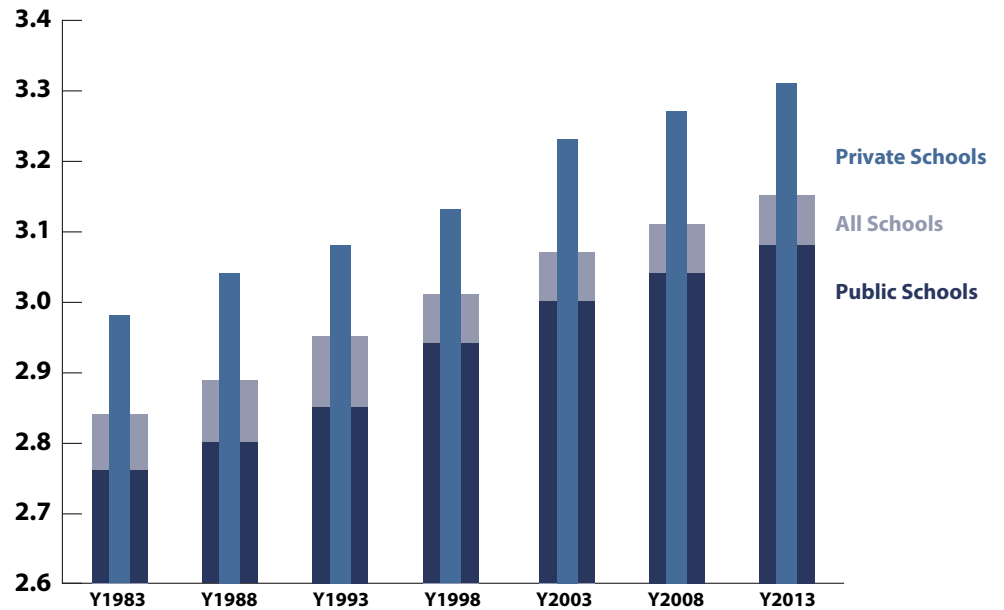
***As a result of 60 years of grade inflation, As are now the most common grade given in college (45%). Grades A and B together constitute 75% of all college grades.***

*Where A Is Ordinary*, a multi-decade study of college grading conducted by Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke University geophysics professor, and Christopher Healy, an associate professor of computer science at Furman University in South Carolina, yields the following findings:

- A grades represent 45% of all letter grades, an increase of 30 percentage points since 1960 and 12 percentage points since 1988 ([Gradeinflation.com](http://Gradeinflation.com), 2016).
- “There is no indication that the rise in grades at public and private schools has been accompanied by an increase in student achievement” ([Rojstaczer and Healey, 2012, p. 8](#)).

Average GPA was 2.35 in the 1930s, but “took off in the 1960s with grades at private schools rising faster than public schools, lulled in the 1970s, and began to rise again in the 1980s at a rate of about 0.10 to 0.15 increases in GPA per decade. The grade inflation that began in the 1980s has yet to end” ([Rojstaczer, 2010, p. 2](#)). Rojstaczer

**Figure 2**  
Recent GPA Trends Nationwide – 4-Year Colleges & Universities



Note. Values estimated from *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*, Gradeinflation.com, 2016 (<http://www.gradeinflation.com>)

and Healy's (2012) analysis leads them to a disquieting conclusion: "When college students perceive that the average grade in a class will be an A, they do not try to excel."

## Conclusion

### Toward Producing Better-Informed Consumers of Texas Public Higher Education

The preceding "reality check" is offered in the hope that prospective Texas college students, their parents, taxpayers, and legislators can become better acquainted with the real challenges, as well as the real opportunities, that lie before us in Texas public higher education.

Until and unless the facts disclosed in this study become common knowledge, too many Texas students will continue to pay too much and learn too little. ★

## References

- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2010). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. University of Chicago Press.
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2015). *Texas affordable baccalaureate program*. <https://www.cael.org/cbe/publication/texas-affordable-baccalaureate-program>
- Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. (2020). *Spotlight on speech codes 2021: The state of free speech on our nation's campuses*. <https://www.thefire.org/resources/spotlight/reports/spotlight-on-speech-codes-2021/>.
- Gillen, A. (2020). *Trends in state funding and tuition revenue for public higher education: 1980-2019*. Texas Public Policy Foundation. <https://files.texaspolicy.com/uploads/2020/09/03084555/Gillen-Trends-in-State-Funding.pdf>
- Ginsberg, B. (2011). *The fall of the faculty: The rise of the all-administrative university and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.
- GradeInflation.com. (2016). *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*. <http://www.gradeinflation.com>
- Institute for College Access and Success. (2020). *Student debt and the class of 2019*. <https://ticas.org/our-work/student-debt/>
- Klein-Collins, B., & Glancey, K. (2015, April 12). *Texas affordable baccalaureate program*. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2015/4/the-texas-affordable-baccalaureate-program>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *2019 Tables and Figures: Table 330.20. Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by control and level of institution and state or jurisdiction: 2017-18 and 2018-19*. Retrieved November 11, 2020, from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_330.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_330.20.asp)
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2000). *2000 Tables and Figures: Table 314. Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates paid by full-time-equivalent students in degree-granting institutions, by control of institution and by state: 1998-99 and 1999-2000*. Retrieved November 11, 2020, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d00/dt314.asp>
- Parker, K. (2019, August 19). *The growing partisan divide in views of higher education*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education/>
- Rojstaczer, S. (2010, April 20). *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*. GradeInflation.com. <http://web.crc.losrios.edu/~larsen/ExtraCredit/GradeInflation.pdf>
- Rojstaczer, S., & Healy, C. (2012). Where A is ordinary: The evolution of American college and university grading, 1940–2009. *Teachers College Record*, 114(7), 1-23. <http://www.gradeinflation.com/tcr2012grading.pdf>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Thomas Lindsay, PhD**, is the distinguished senior fellow of higher education & constitutional studies, and he's the Foundation's senior constitutional scholar. He has more than two decades' experience in education management and instruction, including service as a dean, provost, and college president.

Lindsay was the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH) signature initiative, We the People, which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was later named deputy chairman and chief operating officer of the NEH.

Lindsay co-authored the American government college textbook *Investigating American Democracy* with Gary Glenn, published by Oxford University Press. He has published numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in the world's most prestigious academic journals, including the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Politics*, and the *American Journal of Political Science*.

Lindsay has published articles on higher-education reform in *Real Clear Policy*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Washington Examiner*, *Knight-Ridder Syndicate*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *American Spectator*, *Forbes*, and the *Austin American-Statesman*, among others.

In recognition of his scholarship on democratic education, Lindsay was the 1992-93 Bradley Resident Scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Lindsay earned a PhD and an MA in political science and government from the University of Chicago and a BA *summa cum laude* in political science from Northern Illinois University.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Andrew Gillen, PhD**, is a senior policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and an adjunct professor of economics at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Gillen's recent work has focused on how to reform federal financial aid, how state disinvestment is a myth, and how post-college earnings and debt should be used to inform student choice and government accountability.

Prior to joining the Foundation, Dr. Gillen spent over a decade at nonprofit and philanthropic organizations researching and trying to improve higher education. He was a program officer for the Charles Koch Foundation and served in research roles for American Institutes for Research, Education Sector; the American Council of Trustees and Alumni; and the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. He was also on the U.S. Department of Education's Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.

Andrew has a PhD in economics from Florida State University and a BBA (business) degree from Ohio University.



**Lucy Meckler** is the Next Generation Texas campaign manager. She graduated from Hillsdale College with a BA in English and a minor in classical education.

### **About Texas Public Policy Foundation**

The Texas Public Policy Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute. The Foundation promotes and defends liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise in Texas and the nation by educating and affecting policymakers and the Texas public policy debate with academically sound research and outreach.

Funded by thousands of individuals, foundations, and corporations, the Foundation does not accept government funds or contributions to influence the outcomes of its research.

The public is demanding a different direction for their government, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation is providing the ideas that enable policymakers to chart that new course.

