

# (NOT) CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN

## Debunking 12 Common Myths About Higher Education

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### **Myth 1: A's and B's Are Marks of Distinction in College, With C's Signifying Average Performance.**

**Reality:** According to [GradeInflation.com](https://www.gradeinflation.com/), as well as other later surveys, in the early 1960s, the percentage of A's awarded in colleges nationwide was 15%.

But today, an A is the most common grade awarded in college. As of 2023, 45%–47% of all college grades nationwide are A's. A's and B's together today constitute 75%–80% of all college grades.

Texas is not immune. In 1985, Texas A&M awarded A's for 26% of grades. By 2011, it was awarding 39% A's.

College grades are the currency of higher education. Just as monetary inflation devalues the dollar, grade inflation devalues official transcripts.

Think about it: We can never truly know whether we are improving Texas students' learning outcomes if universities continue to hand out Monopoly Money grades.

### **Myth 2: Our Universities Have Taken Civics Education Seriously.**

**Reality:** This generation, through no fault of its own, has been taught less civics than prior generations.

A survey by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation (now rebranded as the [Institute for Citizens and Scholars](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/)) makes things painfully clear:

On one hand, there is some good news: 90% of immigrants to this country pass the U.S. Citizenship Test on their first try.

**The bad news:** Only 23% of native-born Texans under the age of 45 can pass the test. Meanwhile, Americans tested in civics in the 1940s and '50s scored higher than those tested in 1990, suggesting that there was nothing wrong with what critics derisively label "your grandmother's civics."

Worse, the test consists of only 20 questions, all of which can be found online before the test.

Still worse, applicants have to answer only 12 questions correctly (a 60% score) to pass the Citizenship Test.

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**Let this reality sink in:** We are educating, and have been educating, civic illiterates. How can we expect them to defend a country they do not even understand?

**How to remedy this crisis:** Texas should follow the example of Utah, which last year passed a bill ([SB 334, 2025](#)) instituting a new curriculum at Utah State University modeled after the [General Education Act Model Proposal](#), which reconfigures the general education curriculum to highlight American history, American government, and Western civilization.

### **Myth 3: The Public Is Satisfied With What Colleges Offer.**

**Reality:** The public no longer instinctively treats college as an unquestioned good. Confidence has fallen because families increasingly see a gap between what college costs and what it delivers. According to [Gallup](#), just 42% of Americans say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in what college offers students. A report from [Data for Progress](#) states that “voters are split on whether or not the benefits of a college degree outweigh the costs.” Furthermore, less than 50% of voters view the benefits of college as outweighing the costs.

The public’s growing distrust has a rational basis: Only [41% of recent college graduates](#) have been able to secure a “full-time job in their field.” These students continue to express the failings of universities to provide nonpoliticized classes and say that they are not being taught relevant job skills. “Roughly 9 in 10 of all undergraduates surveyed,” [The Washington Times](#) reports, “said their degrees were worth the cost.” A [CNBC](#) story describes that the current market for jobs that do not require a degree is growing fast, but many recent graduates remain crowded into oversaturated roles instead of pursuing higher-demand work. “I did everything by the book, had a 4.0 GPA, worked with career services, and quadruple-checked my resume. I did everything by the book, and I still couldn’t land a job,” one recent college graduate told [CNBC](#). High GPA in college often reflects skill at performing in the grading system, not necessarily deep, durable learning.

### **Myth 4: In Texas and Nationwide, Tuitions Had to Rise to Make Up for State Cuts in Higher Education.**

**Reality:** Andrew Gillen’s study, “The Myth of State Disinvestment in Higher Education” ([2019](#)), thoroughly debunks this myth.

Gillen demonstrates that state funding per student for public higher education has generally trended upward over the long term (increasing by thousands of dollars from 1980 to 2022 when properly adjusted), contradicting the common narrative of sustained disinvestment.

Gillen’s regression analysis of historical data finds only a very weak statistical relationship between changes in state funding and tuition revenue, with tuition rising by just \$0.03 to \$0.27 (point estimate \$0.15) for every \$1 cut in state funding—far from the commonly assumed dollar-for-dollar offset.

This indicates that tuition hikes are *driven primarily by other factors, not state funding cuts*, and that public universities have seen substantial real increases in total resources over recent decades ([Gillen, 2023](#)).

An [American Enterprise Institute](#) report finds that at the colleges with the highest staff-to-student ratios, noninstructional staffing has grown so large that there is more than one staff member for every three students, driven especially by administrative hires that far exceed both peer institutions and even the number of instructional faculty. The University of Texas–Austin is one of the worst offenders, with 281 full-time-equivalent noninstructional staff per 1,000 full-time students. [Forbes](#) states the problem succinctly: “The United States spends more per student on colleges and universities than virtually every other country in the developed world.”

### **Myth 5: Possessing a College Degree Guarantees You Have Learned Something.**

**Reality:** In their influential 2011 book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa analyzed data from over 2,300 undergraduates at 24 diverse U.S. institutions using the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a standardized test of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication.

Their chief findings were sobering: approximately 36% of students showed only modest statistically significant improvement on the CLA after four years of college. The authors concluded that large numbers of U.S. college students can be described as “academically adrift,” graduating without developing the higher-order cognitive skills widely assumed to be the core purpose of a college education (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

### **Myth 6: Federal Education Funds Go Primarily to Poor Students.**

**Reality:** Subsidies remain lowest for low-income schools. Aid policy often masks the real affordability problem. Federal aid can soften the immediate price, but it does not necessarily discipline institutional costs or ensure access for the poorest students. Federal K–12 funding is largely distributed through formula grants such as Title I, Title III, and special education grants, which are explicitly designed to support students from low-income families, English learners, and children with disabilities. But despite this targeting, federal aid often displaces state and local funding, so poor districts end up only modestly better off, and the funding gap between high- and low-income districts persists. According to a [Cato Institute](#) report, “federal subsidies, particularly Title I, are supposed to redistribute funds to disadvantaged schools, but the government is not very successful at such redistribution,” as in many cases federal funds are a small share of total school budgets. Even when directed at low-income schools, they do not fully close the gap created by unequal state and local funding.

### **Myth 7: The Cost of College Tuition Has Increased No Faster Than Other Goods.**

**Reality:** Tuition outpaces inflation. Tuition has increased at a staggering rate of 312.4% since 1963, even when adjusting for inflation—a 40x average annual cost increase, according to the [Education Data Initiative](#). The report from Education Data Initiative adds that for the 2026–27 school year, tuition at both public and private two-year institutions is projected to increase by an average of 1.65%.

### **Myth 8: Student-Loan Debt Has Increased No Faster Than Other Forms of Debt.**

**Reality:** Student debt has become a normal feature of American adulthood, one that is compounded with uncertain labor-market returns and extended time-to-degree. “Student loan debt is the 2nd largest consumer debt balance in the United States (after mortgages),” the [Education Data Initiative](#) states. A [Bank of America Institute](#) report sounds the alarm on new student loan delinquencies, finding that in the first half of 2025, it exceeded the 2019 average, with many of those delinquencies coming from borrowers over the age of 50. “One of the most notable jumps in the data within the Household Debt and Credit reports so far this year was in student loan balances which edged up by \$7 billion and stood at \$1.64 trillion in the second quarter of 2025.”

### **Myth 9: Most College Students Still Attend Four-Year Residential Colleges and Universities Full Time.**

**Reality:** Policy debates still imagine the 18-year-old residential undergraduate as the norm, but higher education increasingly serves working adults, commuters, online learners, and students moving through fragmented pathways. Only a small minority—roughly 15–20%—of all college students today fit the classic profile of attending a four-year residential college full-time (Kelchen, 2018; [Education Data Initiative, 2025](#)).

“Today’s college students are often older and have work experience as well as more outside-of-school responsibilities,” a [Manhattan Institute](#) report states. “These students have a different

set of needs and expectations from universities.” U.S. undergraduates exhibit nontraditional traits like age 25 or older, full-time work, or family responsibilities, necessitating programs for working adults that allow for online, hybrid, and evening formats with asynchronous access and short terms.

### **Myth 10: Most College Students Graduate in Four Years.**

**Reality:** The current *four-year* graduation rate for Texas public university students is 40–45%. The average *six-year* college graduation rate in Texas is 66%.

Time-to-degree is a hidden cost. Every additional semester adds tuition, fees, living expenses, and lost earnings, and many students find themselves requiring additional time to graduate. In 2024, just over 61% of college students graduated within six years of starting their program, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#), with almost 65% graduating within eight years.

### **Myth 11: Administrative Costs Have Remained Steady and Have Not Contributed to Skyrocketing Tuitions and Student Debt.**

**Reality:** In his 2011 book *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg finds that American universities have undergone a fundamental power shift in which professional administrators—often lacking substantial academic experience—have seized control from the faculty, leading to bloated bureaucracies, rising costs, and the erosion of academic quality and governance.

Ginsberg documents the dramatic growth in administrative positions (far outpacing faculty and student enrollment increases), the rise of “deanlets,” and administrators’ tendencies to

prioritize their own interests, empire-building, and non-academic initiatives over teaching and research. He finds that this administrative takeover transformed universities into institutions more focused on revenue generation and self-perpetuation than on their core educational mission.

Ginsberg finds that the number of administrators and professional staff per student nearly doubled (or more, depending on how broadly “staffers” are defined), while the faculty-to-student ratio stayed essentially flat. Ginsberg uses these figures to argue that universities have become “all-administrative” institutions.

An economist explained to [U.S. News](#) that “the number of [college] administrators has soared relative to the number of students and to the number of faculty, and there’s a corresponding increase in the cost of doing business.” According to a report from [New America](#), “with administrative costs factored in, federal loans to undergraduates over the next five and 10 years will cost \$5.1 billion and \$16.7 billion, respectively, and almost all of those costs are due to administrative expenses.”

### **Myth 12: Online Education Will Never Replace Traditional Education.**

**Reality:** Online education is no longer experimental. The pandemic accelerated a transformation already underway. Hybrid and online models now force institutions to justify the cost of traditional delivery. “By 2016,” a report from the [American Enterprise Institute](#) describes, “more than three-quarters of degree-granting colleges offered at least one online course. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course increased by one million, representing a 19 percent increase.”

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<sup>1</sup> Updated analyses confirm ~15.6% on-campus rate persists.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Thomas Lindsay, Ph.D.**, is the Higher Education Policy Director for Next Generation Texas. 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.

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