

Paying for College: How Do Students' Views Differ by Social Class?



Money means different things to different people in different contexts.

A recent study explores this reality as it pertains to paying for higher education.

An article about the study, which was conducted by [Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley](#) of Baylor University, [Ashli Duncan-Buchanan](#) of The University of Texas at Austin, [Eliza Epstein](#) of The University of Texas at Austin, NEPC Fellow [Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California, and [Lauren Schudde](#) of The University of Texas at Austin, was published in October in the peer-reviewed journal, [Education Policy Analysis Archives](#).

The researchers drew upon interviews with 56 Texas community college students who had indicated they planned to transfer to a four-year school in the next 12 months. The students' socioeconomic backgrounds varied, ranging from working-class and lower-middle-class students whose parents typically did not have college degrees to upper-middle-class students whose parents had typically graduated from four-year schools.

This allowed the researchers to explore how the students' financial status interacted with perceptions of money, personal finances, financial aid, and considerations around transferring to four-year schools.

Regardless of a family's economic status, the students largely chose community college because it cost less than four-year schools. They also used financial aid for survival costs and not just for expenses related directly to school, such as textbooks. There was a tendency to view these funds as replacement for lost income they would have received had they worked the hours they instead devoted to class.

Although students were willing to take them on, loans were viewed as a last resort, particularly for students from low-income families. The researchers therefore note the importance, when discussing financial aid with students, of distinguishing between loans versus grants that do not need to be repaid.

Family finances played a large role in perceptions of paying for college. For working-class and lower-middle-class students, self-discovery and actualization could be key goals of education. However, higher education was also more likely to be viewed as a family enterprise, with students' choices of majors and schools heavily influenced by views of what might be in the best interest of their families.

"Higher education is a potentially risky familial investment that could affect the entire family's well-being," the researchers wrote.

To minimize risk, students are incentivized to pursue majors and degrees that lead to stable, well-paying jobs, such as nursing or accounting, rather than liberal arts or other degrees where the transition from major to known career is less certain, such as linguistics.

Students from working-class and lower-middle-class families experienced considerably more difficulty with the mechanics of paying for college, devoting hours to proving they qualified for assistance with tuition, and dropping in and out of school as they qualified for then lost financial aid on the basis of grades and other factors. But the researchers also pointed out that military educational benefits played a key role for some students.

While middle-class students expected to graduate with at least some loan debt, their upper-middle-class counterparts viewed paying for college as their parents' responsibility—especially given the fact that their families' incomes disqualified them from receiving many forms of assistance that did not have to be repaid. College was often seen as a way to maintain privilege and was also viewed as expected, rather than optional, even as some students questioned whether their degrees would be worth the cost.

The researchers offer a variety of useful recommendations:

- Students should start planning how to pay for college well before they reach the age for higher education;
- They should fill out financial aid forms even if they think they will not qualify for assistance;
- Colleges should more clearly indicate whether sources of financial aid are loans or grants;

- They should also help students learn the financial skills they need to navigate the financial aid systems currently in place;
- Even faculty members whose subject matter expertise is not directly related to finances can help by at least knowing where to direct students who need more information on the subject;
- More aid should be dispensed as grants rather than as loans that have to be repaid; and
- “[C]onversations about money and financing [should] become normalized in higher education, outside of the financial aid office.”

NEPC Resources on Higher Education

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