



[Return to the Article](#)

December 14, 2013

Debunking Three (More) Higher-Ed Myths

By [Thomas K. Lindsay](#)

My [last column](#) uncovered three higher-education myths -- (1) declining state funding is the chief cause of skyrocketing public-university tuitions; (2) a college degree means you've significantly increased your fundamental academic skills; and (3) A and B grades signal above-average performance. I was asked by several readers whether these are the only myths obstructing our ability to address the crisis in higher-education affordability and quality. Sad to say, they are not. The myths keep coming. Here are three more:

Most college students attend four-year residential campuses full time. Wrong. A [recent study](#) finds non-traditional students now form the majority of postsecondary students: "more than 4 in 10 attend two-year community colleges. Nearly one-third are over 24. Forty percent are enrolled part time." Such students often cannot afford relocating to a four-year college. Many have families of their own to raise and for which to provide. By what means might they hope to acquire a postsecondary education? For more than a few of this new majority, the best if not only option is online education.

But you wouldn't know of the opportunities offered by online learning from our second myth: *Online education is a "Walmart fad" that will not significantly change the face of higher education.* Facts show otherwise. According to one [study](#), by 2015, 25 million postsecondary students will take online courses. The number of students studying on physical campuses alone will fall from 2010's 14.4 million to 4.1 million in 2015. [Another study](#) finds "the rate of growth in online enrollments is ten times that of the rate in all higher education."

Online education is making its presence felt at not only the collegiate but also the K-12 level. Education experts Clayton Christensen and Michael Horn [predict](#) that, by 2019, 50 percent of all courses for grades 9-12 will be taken online, "the vast majority of them in blended-learning school environments."

Less expensive, more accessible online operations promise to create competition for traditional universities, which seem, even in our stagnant economy, to be unable or unwilling to cut expenses. But you wouldn't know this from our last myth: *Administrative costs have remained steady, and have not contributed to skyrocketing tuitions and student debt.* In truth, administrative expenses have exploded. Forty years ago, U.S. colleges employed more faculty than administrators. But [today](#), teachers make up fewer than half of college employees.

According to Benjamin Ginsberg's study *The Fall of the Faculty*, "Forty years ago ... the efforts of 446,830 professors were supported by 268,952 administrators and staffers. Over the past four decades, though, as the number of full-time professors increased slightly more than 50 percent ... the number of administrators

and administrative staffers employed by those schools increased by an astonishing 85 percent and 240 percent, respectively." From 1947 to 1995, "overall university spending increased 148 percent" (inflation-adjusted). "Administrative spending, though, increased by a whopping 235 percent. Instructional spending, by contrast, increased only 128 percent, 20 points less than the overall rate of spending increase."

Ginsberg adds that from 1998 to 2003, deans and vice presidents saw their salaries increase as much as 50 percent. "By 2007, the median salary paid to a president of a doctoral degree-granting institution was \$325,000. Eighty-one presidents earned more than \$500,000 and twelve earned over \$1 million."

A Chronicle of Higher Education [survey](#) of administrators' salaries at public universities notes that high-paid administrators must take a careful path when arguing that their "budgets have been cut to the bone ... while at the same time acknowledging their rarified personal financial circumstances in states where layoffs, program closures, and pay reductions have been all too common."

It gets worse. Shockingly, the tuition-and-debt crisis has not restrained spending on administration. Another [study](#) finds that "colleges and universities continued to focus more on hiring administrators and executives over faculty in Q1 2012, although the rate of change has slowed." An updated [report](#) discovers that "instead of focusing on teaching resources and salaries, schools have chosen to focus on hiring executives, administrators, and administrative supporters. In the first quarter of 2013, only 30.8% of the jobs posted at colleges and universities were for faculty, whereas 69.5% of the jobs posted were for administrators and executives."

Faced squarely, the crisis in higher education affordability and quality will be difficult enough to resolve on its own terms. But it will be impossible to resolve if we continue to fly blinded by myths masquerading as narrative.

Thomas K. Lindsay directs the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and is editor of [SeeThruEdu.com](#). He was deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under George W. Bush. He recently published Investigating American Democracy with Gary D. Glenn (Oxford Press).

Page Printed from:

http://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/14/debunking_three_more_higher-ed_myths_773.html at December 16, 2013 - 05:23:04 PM EST