

## Keeping College Affordable in New Jersey

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Presidential campaign rhetoric about college affordability often focuses on “problems,” and media reports of candidates’ proposals can make the so-called problems seem even worse. In fact, New Jersey’s students need to understand that they can afford a degree from one of the state’s high quality senior public institutions of higher education; they can expect to graduate on time; and their degree is the key to entering New Jersey’s workforce.

The details behind the cost and value of a college education are important. Some suggest that a typical college tuition costs \$40,000. Actually, the average in-state tuition including required fees at New Jersey’s public four-year colleges and universities was [\\$13,002](#) last year.

While less than the public may imagine, this sticker price is still relatively high nationally. We’ve reached this level of cost after decades of underfunding by the state, starting long before the recession of 2007-2009. State appropriations per full-time equivalent student adjusted for inflation decreased a dramatic [46 percent over the 20 years between 1993 and 2013](#) in New Jersey. Total full-time equivalent enrollment at New Jersey’s public four-year institutions increased 79 percent during this time period. Between 2002 and 2012, New Jersey had the [tenth-largest percentage increase in total public enrollment](#) in the U.S.

Constructing facilities to meet this explosive demand is another significant cost factor. Between 1988 and 2012 – the dates of the last two voter-approved state-funded bond issues for higher education construction – the institutions themselves largely paid for the classrooms, libraries, labs, and residence halls needed. Moody’s Investors Service, in its [reviews of the credit ratings of the senior public colleges and universities this spring](#), considered the low level of state appropriations for capital and operations in its analyses.

Another supposed problem is that institutions automatically increase tuition when state funding is cut. In New Jersey, that premise is false. New Jersey’s senior public colleges and universities had the [fifth-lowest percentage increase in in-state tuition and required fees over the past five years](#).

Many students rely on loans to afford a college education, but it is important to distinguish between public and private institutions. In 2012-2013, bachelor’s degree recipients at public four-year institutions owed an [average of \\$25,600 nationally](#), compared to [an average of \\$31,200 owed by graduates from private, nonprofit institutions](#).

State-funded grants also help students afford their education, and New Jersey has generous programs. In 2013, New Jersey provided [\\$1,300 in state grant aid per full-time undergraduate, the fifth most nationally](#).

Ultimately, investing in a degree from one of New Jersey’s senior public colleges and universities pays off. Presidential candidates may claim that six-year graduation rates at public four-year institutions are below 60 percent. At New Jersey’s public four-year institutions, the six-year graduation rate for the Class of 2013 was [67.2 percent](#), sixth best in the U.S.

Allegedly, a college education is “[out of step with the job market.](#)” On the contrary, a bachelor’s degree is still an indispensable credential. The [U.S. unemployment rate](#) in July 2015 for graduates with a bachelor’s degree and higher was 2.6 percent, less than half the 5.5 percent rate for high school graduates. [Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce](#) estimated that of the 2.9 million “good jobs” (those that pay more than \$53,000 annually) that were added to the U.S. economy since 2010, 2.8 million went to workers with at least a bachelor’s degree. In New Jersey, a bachelor’s degree will be a key to employment: by 2020, [29 percent of the state’s jobs will require a bachelor’s degree](#), tied with Colorado for the most in any state.

New Jersey is having its own discussion about college affordability, through the College Affordability Study Commission, established by [law](#) to recommend ways to address the cost of higher education. The ten-member commission will report its recommendations by October 2016. We look forward to contributing to its important work.

While the discussion continues, New Jersey’s senior public colleges and institutions have done more than talk about affordability and have made their degrees accessible and valuable to their graduates.