



August 28, 2023

The Honorable James Kvaal
Under Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Under Secretary Kvaal,

I write as president of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) following a [recent article](#) from the Wall Street Journal falsely suggesting that public “flagship” universities are spending recklessly and jacking up tuition prices as a result. Because the article omits critical facts, I wanted to be sure you were aware of its shortcomings. APLU raised these shortcomings in the Journal’s reporting in a letter to the editor submission, but the Journal declined to publish the letter.

Start with tuition. The Journal’s article left readers with the mistaken impression that in-state tuition increases have significantly outpaced inflation in recent years. Yet, **average in-state tuition and fees at public flagship universities in the 2022-23 school year was just \$118 above what it was a decade ago in inflation-adjusted terms.** The Journal notes flagship universities raised tuition following steep cuts in state support over the past two decades, but does not provide a complete snapshot of college costs for in-state undergraduate students. Last year, average published tuition and fees at public flagship universities were \$12,486. Median *annual* earnings for recent bachelor’s degree recipients are \$17,680 higher than median earnings for peers whose highest degree is a high school diploma. The earnings premium grows after additional years in the workforce.

These figures on published tuition and fees come from the widely cited and only publicly available dataset on tuition and fees at state “flagship” universities that we are aware of, which were [released last year](#) as part of the College Board’s annual Trends in College Pricing report. The Journal routinely covers the College Board’s data releases. In the latest College Board [report](#), its authors remark on this trend, writing: “Public flagship universities in 44 states had lower in-state tuition and fees in 2022-23 than in 2017-18, after adjusting for inflation.” Although a small chart in the Journal article titled “cost of attending college as an in-state undergraduate” appears to support these exact same trends, the text makes no mention of it.

Notably, most students do not pay the full published in-state tuition and fees – something the Journal acknowledges in its article. Institutional, state, and federal grant aid lowers the cost of tuition and fees for students and their families. The College Board does not publish data on this “net” in-state tuition and fees for public flagship universities specifically, but it does publish figures for all public four-year universities. **Across public four-year universities, net in-state tuition and fees were \$2,250 in the 2022-2023 school year – \$1,430 lower than in the 2006-2007 school year in inflation-adjusted terms.** Public research universities are the most affordable path to a high-quality education and remain deeply committed to containing costs and boosting affordability.

Against the backdrop of extremely limited increases in in-state tuition over the past decade, public universities have stepped up to meet the growing needs of today’s college students. As college access has increased over the past several decades, universities have worked to provide additional services to students including those who are more likely to be food insecure, parents, or facing mental health challenges than ever

before. Public universities have also expanded administrative supports using evidence-based practices to — for example, boost graduation rates, provide critical mental health support, and combat campus sexual misconduct, in ways responsive to public and policymaker interests. Broadly attacking growth of administrative positions obscures how these services are critical to the success and well-being of students. Public universities are also facing a myriad of state and federal regulations that add to compliance costs.

Adding to the article's omissions, the Journal compares campus spending increases to tuition revenue, but fails to note that research comprises a significant portion of public universities' expenses – and, more importantly, their mission. Often, research accounts for more than one-fifth of flagships' expenses. These institutions are [powerhouses for their states, regions, and country](#), conducting revolutionary research that sparks lifesaving medical breakthroughs; fuels innovation, job creation, and economic growth; and improves quality of life through pathbreaking discoveries. Much of the world marvels at the quality, productivity, and impact of these public institutions and the immense societal ROI on the public's investment in them.

Lastly, the article draws overly simplistic conclusions about university budgets as it relates to spending of facilities and infrastructure. The budgets at flagship universities are typically in the billions of dollars, and incredibly complicated due to expansive missions, many different revenue streams to support those missions, and a myriad of state and federal funding regulations. While that complexity makes them difficult to understand and report on, it also is at the heart of the vitally important roles that our flagship universities play in their states and for our nation.

As I know the article will likely generate further interest, particularly given its sensationalized conclusions, I appreciate your support in conveying the full picture to key constituencies. Please do not hesitate to let me know how APLU can provide support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Becker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Mark Becker
President
APLU