

# US tallies of colleges' net costs bring surprises

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 19, 2013

A college “score card,” unveiled last week by the US Department of Education to help families compare the affordability and value of colleges, contains a bit of sticker shock: An average net price of \$18,277 a year to attend Harvard University, compared with \$32,493 for Northeastern University.

The numbers defy common expectations because the score card takes into account scholarships and grants that do not have to be repaid. Subtracting those from the official sticker price provides a more realistic picture of what the school would probably cost a typical student.

The data include loan-default rates and graduation percentages, and the average each student borrows. The Education Department is working on a database to show the average earnings of former students.

The interactive score card, President Obama said in announcing it last week in his State of the Union address, will help students and families to “get the most bang for your educational buck.”

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At universities in Greater Boston, officials welcomed the initiative as a way to show prospective students that the price of a college education might be more affordable than they believed.

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**Graphic: How local colleges score**

“The new score card highlights Harvard’s considerable efforts to offer an affordable college education for undergraduates from all economic backgrounds, whether they study at Harvard College or at the Harvard Extension School,” said Kevin Galvin, a university spokesman.

For a Harvard undergraduate, students from families with incomes below \$65,000 generally pay nothing to attend. Families with incomes between \$65,000 and \$150,000 pay up to 10 percent of their family income. Harvard is need blind, meaning that financial need is not an impediment to admission.

“We obviously support the spirit of this,” said Mike Armini, a spokesman for Northeastern. “I think it’s a matter of being one of many tools in the toolbox, which would include visiting campuses and speaking directly with admissions and financial aid staff. It’s part of the mix.”

The federal government unveiled the score card amid growing concern about college debt and as many schools continue hiking costs.

That is putting the squeeze on families, even those considered middle class, who may not qualify for much aid and who may be dealing with stagnant wages.

Much of the information already is available elsewhere, education advocates said, but the interactive website is seen as a way for families to find a limited amount of key data in one location.

The figures could surprise some families who might reject a college based on its full, or sticker, price — which often runs far higher.

In Harvard’s case, the total figure is \$52,652 for tuition, room, board, and fees; at Northeastern, the comparable cost is \$53,226. At Boston University, the annual total bill is approximately \$56,000, but the average net cost is \$29,899.

“Obviously, it’s a snapshot of the major categories, and they may not provide all the answers. But they’re a good basis for beginning the conversation,” said Colin Riley, a Boston University spokesman, of the new score card.

The College Scorecard also compares institutions against national standards, using indicators that resemble a fire-danger gauge to rank an institution’s costs as low, medium, or high.

Among the indicators is the percentage of a college's full-time students who receive a bachelor's degree within six years. They are typically high among the major regional universities. Boston College showed a 90.8 percent rate; Tufts University, 90.2 percent; BU, 84.7 percent; and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, 67.4 percent.

Education advocacy groups applauded the score card, but stressed that its scope is limited.

"This is a reasonable and appropriate thing for the federal government to do, but it's not a game-changer," said Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education, an association of colleges and universities. "It doesn't provide much information that is not already available."

Similar information can be found on a Department of Education website called the College Navigator, said Hartle, a former education adviser to the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

One improvement is that the new score card breaks down indebtedness into average monthly payments, he said, compared with College Navigator figures that show total debt.

Another difference, Hartle said, is that the White House score card on indebtedness includes students who dropped out or transferred from a particular college. By contrast, the College Navigator includes only graduates in its calculation, which increases the average figures.

On the score card, the average monthly payment on a 10-year federal student loan is \$88.61 per academic year for a Harvard student and \$287.70 for a Northeastern student.

Inquisitive students still need to do some digging to get a full picture of their best college options, but the government has chosen to assist in what it considers to be the most important categories

"Does this fundamentally change what people know about colleges? No," Hartle said. "I think the big question is whether people thinking about going to college are going to go to the White House website to look for information."

Armini, the Northeastern spokesman, said he looks forward to seeing

information on the score card that reflects employment prospects.

“To us, that is critically important. In our case, 90 percent of our students are either employed or in graduate school nine months after graduation,” Armini said. “We view Northeastern as a high-value proposition.”

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