



# Including More Student Voices in Higher Education Policymaking

Rising Tuitions and Student Debts  
Mean Rising Stakes for College Students

Julie Margetta Morgan and Tsuki Hoshijima

November 2011



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# Contents

1	Introduction and summary
5	How students get heard on campus and beyond
13	What keeps student voices from getting stronger?
19	Keys to success and policy recommendations
24	About the authors and acknowledgements
25	Endnotes

# Introduction and summary

The Occupy Wall Street protests highlight the difficulties that the 99 percent face in paying for a college education. The protesters call for student loan forgiveness, carrying signs that read:

- “I’m a student with \$25,000 in school loans. I am the 99 percent.”
- “I was promised the American Dream, but I am living the American Nightmare.”
- “Prostitution: The only job option available after graduation to afford my student loan debt!”

The Wall Street protesters are bringing a lot of attention to the burden student loan debt places on young Americans. Their stories are now reported often by National Public Radio, in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major news media outlets. And though it is unclear whether these students’ voices were the impetus for his actions, their sentiments are certainly reflected in President Barack Obama’s new executive actions to relieve student loan debt. The president’s proposal would allow some students to consolidate their loans to achieve a lower interest rate, and it would change the income-based repayment program to give participating students lower monthly payments.<sup>1</sup>

Students are quick to speak out against the high cost of tuition and the burden of student loan debt—not to mention the bleak employment situation that faces them upon graduation. And as Occupy Wall Street illustrates, students have tremendous potential to bring these issues to the forefront of the national political arena. But the problems they highlight require complex solutions that take into account the complex interplay of federal and state law as well as higher education institutional practice.

Policymakers, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations engage in policy debates on a daily basis on these problems, offering a range of long-term solutions to fix our higher education system. And though the impact of these debates would be most felt by students, they are often not a part of these conversations.

The congressional battle over the future of for-profit education is a good example. Many for-profit colleges have been abusing the trust students place in them by misrepresenting the educational services they offer and overcharging for standard educational experiences. As a result, their students end up with high student loan debt and such bleak job prospects that they cannot hope to pay their debts.<sup>2</sup>

The Department of Education took on the problems evident in the for-profit college sector through its “gainful employment” regulation. The rule requires colleges to show that their students maintain a low debt-to-income ratio and a high student loan repayment rate in order to receive access to federal financial aid programs.<sup>3</sup>

Lobbyists from for-profit colleges met the gainful employment rule with a multimillion dollar campaign that set about trying to convince legislators that the rule would unnecessarily ruin their colleges and limit access for poor and minority students.<sup>4</sup> Students could have easily countered the lobbyists’ voices, telling their stories of debt and default and asking the federal government to ensure that colleges live up to the promises they make. But even though national groups that represent students led the charge to support the rule, it was incredibly hard to stir up grassroots student voices in the gainful employment debate.

The Senate was able to procure a few students to testify before Congress about their experiences at for-profit institutions, and television shows like *Dateline* rounded up a few more. But students were not exactly banging down their representatives’ doors or holding mass protests on campus. In fact, the largest showing of students was an astroturfing campaign arranged by the for-profit colleges’ lobbying groups, who paid public relations groups to write form letters for students that they submitted to the Department of Education as comments on the rule. The for-profit colleges also paid alumni such as Tiffany Derry, a *Top Chef* contestant, to speak in support of for-profit education.<sup>5</sup>

A powerful version of the gainful employment rule would have resulted in lower student loans. Increased pressure on for-profit colleges may even result in lower tuition prices, or at least better value for the money. So why don’t students show up to protest the way they do on Wall Street?

Strong student voices in higher education policy could help to ensure that federal, state and institutional policy makers continue to direct their reforms toward the issues that matter most to students, including tuition prices, financial aid, and the quality of the courses they offer. This report looks at the role students typically

play in higher education policy and asks whether there are ways to make students' voices a more powerful part of the higher education policy conversation. It draws from research on student activism, the accounts of students currently engaged in policy work, and examples of recent notable student movements.

This analysis points to several key policy recommendations. Federal and state governments, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations all have a role to play in building a strong student voice in higher education. *Federal policymakers should take the following actions:*

- Congress and the Department of Education should ensure significant student representation on committees and panels such as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education board by including at least two student members, one of whom is elected by a national body that represents student governments, such as the American Student Government Association, and one of whom has demonstrated experience dealing the particular policy issues the committee will discuss
- Congress should enable greater transparency around how colleges spend money by requiring educational institutions to submit more detailed information to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System about their revenues and expenses

*State policymakers should:*

- Include student representatives, elected by their peers, on state higher education decision-making bodies such as those that set financial aid and university budget priorities as well as those that govern transfer and articulation
- Establish requirements for state universities to involve students in governance on the campus level

*Philanthropic foundations should:*

- Fund training programs that develop student leaders on higher education policy issues
- Provide support to national and regional organizations that enhance the work of student activists on higher education policy issues

Federal and state governments, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations all have a role to play in building a strong student voice in higher education.

- Require grantees to communicate their findings with student groups
- Foster stronger student government by organizing a national network of student governments

*As these groups work to help students magnify their voice, existing student organizations should:*

- Stay in touch with the needs and desires of the students they represent through social media, grassroots organizing, and surveys to ensure that they take up issues that resonate with their fellow students
- Build consensus on the appropriate policy solutions both on campus and off campus by clearly articulating a point of view with assistance from the non-profit groups that support grassroots student action, using student publications and other media to promulgate it, and engaging with fellow students through social media
- Assess their access to power and the available policy levers to determine the most expedient route to being heard—and making change happen

In the pages that follow, this report will detail the reasons why these sets of actions would help bring student voices into the debates about their own future prospects and prosperity, and then present more fully the recommendations outlined above. The reasons to act are clear and compelling.

# How students get heard on campus and beyond

As Rima Brusi, an anthropologist and chronicler of the recent student movements in Puerto Rico notes, the idea of a “voice” is an apt metaphor for students’ involvement in higher education, because voices come in many different forms. A voice can be a whisper or a yell. It can be part of a productive conversation or a screaming match. And voices can come from many different people speaking the same words but with different meanings, depending upon the speaker’s context.<sup>6</sup>

That’s why it is important to understand all of the different forms student voices might take and to examine the strengths and weaknesses of each. *In this section of the paper we identify six avenues for students to express themselves:*

- Student government
- Cross-campus regional and national student groups
- Student representation on government bodies
- Student publications
- Grassroots movements and other on-campus student groups
- Institutionalized student voices

Let’s consider each of these voices in turn.

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## Student government

One major voice for students on campus is, of course, student government. These governmental bodies vary in size, form, and influence across colleges and universities. Often, the student body elects student representatives for each class. Some universities elect additional representatives from each individual academic division or to represent particular groups of students, such as transfer students or graduate students. Representatives may be organized into a student senate, or an executive board, or both.



The general idea behind student governance may be to present the voices of students to university administrations. Or it may be to govern student organizations, or to oversee the campus judicial process. Or it may be all three. Student governments often control the budgets for other student organizations on campus and provide feedback to university administrations on the issues that matter most to students. Student governments may also undertake initiatives to change policies on issues including tuition, financial aid, hiring, or instruction by lobbying either the university administration or the state legislature. And campus student governing bodies may elect representatives to systemwide or statewide governing boards.

Student governments can be a powerful force on campus, but there are some things that get in the way. For one, student governments can be wildly disconnected from the students they represent—and evidence that the governing body does not represent its students erodes its power. In some cases, the turnout for student government elections is as low as 1 percent. A 2005 study of student government elections showed a mean turnout of 18.8 percent, with a high of almost 70 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Another barrier to a strong student government may be its structure and relationship to the university administration. According to student governance expert Angus Johnston, effective student governments work with university administrations, but they are not governed by these administrations.<sup>8</sup> Some student governments receive their funding as a grant from the university administration rather than through a directed portion of the student body's activity fee. A grant-based funding relationship can be a string that ties the hands of the student representatives, coercing them to stay within the bounds of what the administration wants to ensure continued funds.

A final significant barrier to effective student government is possibly the most obvious: students graduate. Each year, student governments lose members and gain others, resulting in a lack of continuity in terms of experience, commitment, and goals.<sup>9</sup> This can cause organizational problems and perhaps even disconnect in terms of organizational mission and goals. But most of all, it gives an advantage to the university administration on long-term policy change, as the administration can simply wait out students' concerns until they graduate. And administrators often have decades of experience navigating through the world of institutional and state higher education policy, whereas students must learn quickly in order to participate in high-level conversations about higher education policy.

At their weakest, student governments are simply organizers of campus activities and approval boards to rubber-stamp funding for other student groups. But at their best, student governments hold university administration accountable to the needs of the student body.

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## Cross-campus regional and national student groups

In addition to campus-based efforts, students organize into efforts that cross campus lines, and sometimes even state lines. These groups range from nonprofit organizations with professional staff, such as student chapters of different public interest research groups, or PIRGs, which focus on consumer-related issues such as textbook pricing, to nonprofit organizations such as the Center for American Progress's Campus Progress program, to statewide coalitions of student governments such as the United Council of U.W. Students in Wisconsin.

National and regional student organizations have a few advantages that help them amplify the student voice. One is that they are able to draw interested students from across several campuses. Often, it is difficult to find a large group of students on one campus who have a sustained commitment to being active in representing students' interests to the administration. Cross-campus organizations can bring together committed students from multiple campuses and help them to combine their efforts.

Another advantage that cross-campus groups bring is their professional staff. Groups like U.S. PIRG (the federation of public interest research groups), the United States Student Association, Mobilize.org, and Campus Progress employ recent college graduates—often, former student government members or other campus advocates—to help with their organizing and advocacy work. The professional staff can help maintain continuity within the organization even as student members come and go. But it is important to note that the turnover among professional staff may be high at these organizations, as they are often young, mobile college graduates. Also, students may not have the time necessary to do deep policy research in their areas of interest. Professional staff can devote more time to collecting information and pass this knowledge on to the students they represent in a quick, easily digestible format.

National and regional groups can have a depth of knowledge that plugs them into conversations that other students may not even know are going on—intricacies in policy at the state and local level. This can be huge for students or it can turn them

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off. The further these organizations are from working with individual students, the more they start seeming like part of the establishment. (See box)

## National student voices: law school transparency

Kyle McEntee was a law student at Vanderbilt University who noticed a funny thing about the legal profession: Law schools make it very difficult for would-be students to find information about their chosen field before enrolling. Though many law schools list job placement rates and average salaries on their websites, there is little or no regulation of the definitions they use for these terms. Some schools were found to be grossly exaggerating the average salaries of graduates by failing to disclose the response rate for this measure.

Kyle felt that at the very least law schools owe their students reliable and accurate information about the success or failure of their graduates. Rather than starting a small, campus-based advocacy campaign, he launched a national organization called Law School Transparency that seeks to bring light to the data law schools seem so quick to hide. Kyle and his small staff are also working with congressmen in Washington to change federal law to hold law schools accountable for providing accurate employment and salary information.<sup>10</sup>

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### Student newspapers

Student publications are a key voice on college campuses. Campus newspapers may uncover little-known changes in university policy or stories about the consequences of a college's actions on its students. Newspapers also allow students to voice their opinions on the op-ed page or through letters to the editor. And student publications tend to be among the most active student organizations on college campuses.<sup>11</sup>

A widely-read student newspaper or other student publication can give momentum to a student movement by ensuring a flow of objective information and by chronicling or promoting events designed to bring light to the movement. Student newspapers can also help bring national attention to a growing issue on campus, breaking stories that eventually get picked up by other news sources.

One case in point: The *Daily Texan*, University of Texas, Austin's student newspaper, is keeping pressure on the university's administration and the state government to keep down tuition. The newspaper carried editorials pointing out the unfairness of policies that hold down tuition for in-state students but raise it significantly for those from out of state.<sup>12</sup> These articles gave support to the UT student senate in its quest to create a student budgetary advisory committee to advise the university on budget decisions.<sup>13</sup>

Student newspapers help keep the college administration honest on much smaller campuses, too. The *Northwest Trail*, a student publication at the public Northwest College in Wyoming, attracted considerable attention when it broke a story detailing how the college's president sent recruitment letters to Mormon high school students encouraging students to apply because the campus was Mormon-friendly.<sup>14</sup> Though this was the *Trail's* biggest story to date, it also covered the college's prohibition of political posters during the 2008 election and nepotism in faculty and staff compensation.<sup>15</sup>

As always, though, there are a few barriers to an effective student newspaper as a voice for change. Like student governments, student newspapers can be accountable to the college administration for their funding, and this can have a chilling effect on their desire to cover hot-button topics that involve college officials. At the Community College of Philadelphia, for example, the student newspaper staff was replaced mid-year after it published statements critical of the college's administration. The school's action sends a clear message to the new staff about its tolerance for dissent.<sup>16</sup>

What's more, freedom of the press is not quite as certain on college campuses as one might think. Courts have upheld the rights of university administrators to intercede in decisions around the publication of college papers in some states.<sup>17</sup> In Wisconsin, when a student newspaper at Governors State University wrote unfavorably of the dean and refused to print a retraction, the dean of student affairs blocked publication of the paper without her prior review. The U.S. Court of Appeals upheld the university's decision in this case.<sup>18</sup> It is an open question as to whether courts in other circuits would grant colleges similar control over student newspapers.

Student publications are also stymied by their lack of familiarity with institutional arcana. Student journalists may not be familiar with the ins and outs of how the university functions, and this can inhibit adequate reporting on important issues that arise on campus.

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## Student representation on government bodies

Some student voices are heard far beyond their college campuses. This may occur through direct lobbying by student groups, but it often takes the form of represen-

tation on governing bodies. State and federal legislators often include student representatives on committees that determine the course of higher education policy.

In Texas, for example, the state Higher Education Coordinating Board includes a student representative who is a nonvoting member of the board. The selection of student representatives involves some student input, but in the end it is a political decision. The student governments on each campus submit names of potential candidates to the chancellor, who chooses applicants to be submitted to the governor for a final choice.<sup>19</sup>

Sitting side-by-side with policymakers, university officials, and higher education experts can be a great way to empower student voices. But in many cases, students are hindered from the get-go by politicians who choose student representatives based on their political affiliations or other irrelevant characteristics rather than their demonstrated ability to speak to the issues at hand. And it is very difficult for one student to represent the entirety of a state or the country's student body, especially when colleges have several representatives of their own present.

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### Grassroots movements and other on-campus student groups

Often, voices for change on college campuses come from groups outside the established student government channels. A grassroots movement may coalesce to champion a cause, or an existing student group, such as a religiously based student organization or the campus coalition for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, may be the ones who lead the charge.<sup>20</sup> Even fraternities and sororities can become the voice for change on campus when an issue arises that rallies their membership.<sup>21</sup>

Grassroots groups have an advantage over sanctioned student organizations in that they are not beholden to university administrations for funding or assurance of their continued existence. But this stance as an “outsider” may work against them when trying to gain legitimacy with college officials. (see box)

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## The reclaim UC movement

The University of California at Berkeley is well known as a hotbed of student activism. Student protestors at Berkeley have been championing causes such as free speech, civil rights, and peace since as early as the 1930s.<sup>22</sup> And though UC-Berkeley students often focus on issues of national importance, they also turn their focus inward to the college's policies.

When the California state government proposed massive budget cuts to the University of California system, the institutions responded with plans to raise tuition by as much as 16 percent a year for four years. Students throughout the California system criticized the policy change, but UC-Berkeley students were particularly vocal. They faulted the state for failing to raise taxes to generate additional revenue, and they faulted university administration for raising tuition prices while also spending money on new facilities.

The protests were spearheaded by a group called Reclaim UC, a grassroots organization of students, workers, faculty, and members of the community who aim to combat what they see as the privatization of public higher education. The Reclaim UC

movement originally formed to coordinate “study-ins” to protest austerity measures that closed the UC-Berkeley branch libraries on Saturdays. After the tuition hikes were announced, the group turned to protesting the universities’ fiscal policies.<sup>23</sup> Now, as the “Occupy” protests have spread across the nation, Reclaim UC has aligned with the Occupy Oakland movement and is supporting a general strike.<sup>24</sup>

Reclaim UC, by its own admission, has a fluid sense of its own mission.<sup>25</sup> And its primary method of working for change is through mass protests. In September, following protests that have been going on and off since 2009, hundreds of students protested tuition hikes outside Tolman Hall, the education and psychology building, and eventually occupied the building. Police dispersed the protestors after several hours and arrested two students.

The protests do not appear to have achieved their intended result. The California legislature continues to consider new cuts to public education funding that will likely result in more tuition or fee increases. But UC-Berkeley students and others across the UC system, as well as the California State University system, persist in organizing on college campuses and via the Internet.

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## Institutionalized student voices

Students can have voices in higher education policy even when they are not holding signs out in front of the dining hall or signing petitions that go to the state legislature. As state subsidies for higher education go down, students foot the bill for an increasingly large portion of the operating budgets at public universities. And as their purchasing power increases, student’s choices of where to attend speak very loudly to university administration. The only problem is, it is unclear what message they send.

Universities have institutionalized some methods for students to have a voice in the course of their educations. For instance, colleges poll students on everything from the quality of food in the cafeteria to the services offered by the library. And the most widely used student feedback loop is the course evaluation.<sup>26</sup> These surveys can

return precise and robust information about student's preferences, but it is entirely up to the institutions themselves to implement the surveys and make changes based on their results. Some institutions make the course evaluation a stronger voice for students by publishing the results, either online or in student newspapers.

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## Amplifying student voices

Each of these vehicles for student voice can be made more effective through changes within their organizations and support from the outside. But first we need to know what stops student voices from being more forceful in the first place. This is the subject of the next section of this report.

# What keeps student voices from getting stronger?

There are many obstacles to students speaking loud and clear. Some of these barriers were mentioned in the previous section, but here we bring them together. This section will examine both the barriers to a strong student voice in general, and more specifically, the obstacles to student advocacy on complex higher education issues. *Specifically, we will look at:*

- Practical barriers to student organizing
- The myth of the single student voice
- The weaknesses of student leadership
- Lack of access to power
- The changing university
- Lack of university transparency

Each of these barriers is unique, and some may have only a small effect on the power of student voices. But together they can be stifling.

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## Practical barriers to student organizing

At the very least, effective student advocacy requires communication among students and between students and university administrations. And yet some students find that universities have (inadvertently or knowingly) constructed obstacles to this communication. For instance, some universities have strict rules that restrict organizing by prohibiting door-to-door canvassing or limit the use of solicitation tables.<sup>27</sup> Other colleges are located on campuses that, through physical layout, discourage large group gatherings.<sup>28</sup>

The fear of repercussion also discourages students from speaking out on the issues that matter to them. In particular, some universities, including the University of Puerto Rico, respond to student protests with increased police presence.<sup>29</sup> The choice to deal with student disruption through police involvement rather than university channels can have a particularly strong chilling effect on student speech.<sup>30</sup>



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## The myth of the single student voice

Student movements are often subject to failure from within due to one simple fact: There is no such thing as a single student voice. Activist movements on college campuses in the 1960s suffered from this problem—women and minority students splintered from the larger student groups because they felt that their views were ignored or dismissed by groups with larger student voices.<sup>31</sup>

When it comes to issues of higher education policy, students often agree as to the problem but differ on the solution. For instance, many students in the University of California system are troubled by the tuition hikes, but only a subset believe that the proper response to the administration's actions is protest and the occupation of campus buildings.<sup>32</sup>

Many Americans also echo the Occupy Wall Streeters' complaints about student loans, but they do not agree that wide-scale loan forgiveness is the proper answer. Many feel that since they worked hard to pay their loans, others should do the same. Still others complain that students who took on excessive debt could have limited their indebtedness by working while in school or attending a less expensive institution.<sup>33</sup> These individuals would likely come up with very different policy solutions to the crisis of rising student debt.

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## The lack of student leadership

Every instance of student engagement in policy debates begins with a small group of committed students who take on the responsibility of organizing their peers. Strong leaders see an opportunity for change and help others work toward making the change happen. Unfortunately, many capable students see problems in the higher education system but do not feel called to lead.

Studies of the student movements of the 1960s show that these student leaders often emerge from well-educated, upper-middle class backgrounds.<sup>34</sup> But these students tend to be the best served by our current postsecondary education system, whereas lower-income, middle-class, and minority students feel the brunt of the pain from increases in tuition, low-quality educational services, and changes to financial aid policies. It is particularly disconcerting that most often our higher education system fails the very students who are the least likely to speak up about it.

Organizations that work to promote activism among low-income and minority students cite the lack of leadership as a primary barrier.<sup>35</sup> The capacity for leadership may be inherent, but students often need a nudge to help them realize that they can and should be engaging in the conversations that control their financial and academic destinies on campus.

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## Lack of access to power

How many students does it take to make a change in higher education? The answer is it depends. One student can create change if he or she leverages power well. A thousand can march across campus to support their cause and not see a bit of change if they fail to engage key decision makers.

Students often do not have access to the individuals who have the power to change their fate. Many student governments, for example, engage in activities on campus, but they do not seek to influence legislators or policymakers off campus. When those policymakers have control over a university's budget, asking university administrators to hold down tuition prices, offer more classes, or put a stop to budget cuts is a waste of time.

In West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University students are losing power they may never even know they had. There is a voting district in the city that is occupied primarily by students, giving students a strong voice on the city council. And yet with low turnout for city elections—only 60 voters this month—there is a very real chance that redistricting will deprive these students of their voice. The result will be that students will lose their representation in the off-campus issues that matter to them, including parking and roommate capacity in rental houses.<sup>36</sup>

Students at University of Montana are more acutely aware of their lack of power. Though the student association is supposed to have a share with the administration in the decision making on campus, many students who have been appointed to university committees have not received any information from the committee chairs, including meeting times, locations, and associated documents.<sup>37</sup> Some student groups, however, have figured out how to tap into their own power by forming ties with the policymakers that govern their future. (See box)

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## United Council of UW students

The United Council is a statewide organization that represents the students across the entire University of Wisconsin system. In addition to organizing students and providing support to on-campus groups, the council lobbies the Wisconsin legislature on issues of tuition, financial aid, and student rights. Part of the success of the United Council is the fact that, in the 1970s, it successfully lobbied the Wisconsin legislature to add a provision to the Wisconsin code giving students a role in the governance of Wisconsin universities.<sup>38</sup> This mandate for shared governance gives Wisconsin students a sense of legitimacy that many student governments do not share.

The United Council may be one of the most effective statewide student associations in the United States. A big portion of this success is due to the fact that the full-time staff maintains relationships with policymakers and decision makers. They have their ear to the ground on budgetary and policy changes in a way that full-time students cannot.

As recently as September 2011, the United Council achieved wins for the students at Wisconsin universities. The council lobbied the Wisconsin legislature for student representation on the state's special committee on financial aid. This change will give students a real voice in the course of the state's financial aid policy changes.<sup>39</sup>

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### The changing university

From the iconic student protests of the 1960s to today, there's been a marked shift in how students attend college. Many more students have characteristics that are thought to be “nontraditional.” They work to support their education, they have dependents, they have attended college before but dropped out, they are older than the stereotypical 18- to 21-year-old.<sup>40</sup>

Colleges and universities are increasingly offering programs that cater to the changing characteristics of the modern student. Vocationally focused programs are on the rise, particularly at community colleges and for-profit institutions. And colleges offer more online courses (even some online-only degree programs) that allow students to complete their educations from the comfort of their own homes.

These “nontraditional” college students, however, are more difficult to engage on issues of higher education policy for very practical reasons. These students have other concerns that pull at them and take both time and attention away from voicing the need for change in higher education. And students engaged in online education may not get the opportunity to meet other students in their programs, depriving them of the social interactions that often facilitate student movements. In addition, nontraditional students may feel disconnected from the existing student movements on their campuses because these efforts are so focused on the problems that full-time, traditional-age college students face.

At the University of Maryland there is a fairly vibrant group of student organizations that do their best to stay involved in planning the future of the state university system. There are active student groups on all of the branch campuses. But the recently opened University of Maryland University College—an all-online campus—does not have the same kind of strong student voice.

Since students like those at University of Maryland University College have a different relationship to their college than other students, and often use a different learning model they have different needs that warrant their own strong representation in the higher education policy world. The question is, how do you engage these students in higher education policy, when they have so many other concerns pulling at them, and when they are often disconnected from a physical campus and their fellow students?

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### Lack of university transparency

The barriers mentioned so far stand in the way of students having a voice in policy conversations on pretty much any issue, including higher education policies. But there is one barrier that particularly obstructs the student voice in higher education, and that is the opacity of colleges' decision-making process.

Students who are interested in changing higher education policy, whether on their own campus or beyond it, simply do not have access to the debates that precede the ultimate decisions on issues of higher education policy. Students tend to hear only the final decision a college, system, or other governing body makes. Students, for example, are notified of problems with the Pell Grant program only when cuts to Pell are already on the table. They hear about the fact that their tuition is going up only after the decision is all but finalized. There are many, many behind-the-scenes conversations that take place before these ultimate decisions, to which students are generally not privy.

This lack of openness certainly added to the frustrations that students at UC-Berkeley felt when they decided to take part in protests over proposed tuition hikes. Students knew that the state legislature was cutting funding to the universities, and it knew that the universities would respond with increases in tuition. But they questioned whether there were other ways to find savings. They were not a part of the complex conversations that very likely took place, weighing options like closing university facilities or cutting staff and course offerings.

The UC students at Berkeley and beyond gravitated toward an open letter penned by Bob Meister, the president of the Council of UC Faculty Associations. The letter purported to give a behind-the-scenes (and rather unfavorable) look at just what the UC system was funding with increased tuition.<sup>41</sup> Its contents were disputed by Mark Yudof, the president of the UC system, who told UC student reporters that student fees could not be used to pay debt service on university bonds, as Meister claimed.<sup>42</sup>

But it is clear why students would appreciate any glance they can get into the inner workings of the university budget. Without a full understanding of how universities make their decisions, students cannot exert any influence over the ultimate choices colleges make. At the very least, students need information about how colleges make and spend their money, from tuition revenues and financial aid expenditures to the cost of faculty, spending on graduate programs, and capital outlays.

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## Empowering student voices

The variety of barriers to students speaking out on campus and increasingly off campus these days—or being heard when they do—are highly unlikely to fall without concerted action by federal and state policymakers, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations active on issues of higher education, and of course existing and new student groups, too. They all have a role to play in building strong student voices in higher education. To this we now turn.

# Keys to success and policy recommendations

So what makes a student voice a shout, not a whisper? Whether it's the student government association or a one-man operation, there are a couple of common elements. Strong student voices need leaders that come from all kinds of backgrounds, particularly lower-income, minority, and nontraditional students. Strong student voices also need places at the table in higher education policy discussions—places that promote greater university transparency, encourage student involvement in government decision making on policies that affect colleges, and provide access to persons in positions of power.

There are many ways to cultivate stronger student voices on the issues that plague higher education. State and federal governments, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations that work in postsecondary education policy can all play a role in developing this voice. *Our recommendations for these groups are to:*

- Develop student leaders
- Give students a place at the table in higher education decision making
- Help students engage the media
- Increase transparency around university decision making

These recommendations should go hand in hand, but for presentation purposes we consider each in turn.

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## Develop student leaders

There will be few strong student voices without student leadership, and these leaders must represent the diversity of individuals who currently enroll in postsecondary education in the United States. Good leaders understand how to work with and through others to achieve their objectives. They may have innate qualities, but there also are learned skills that help them both identify realistic prospects for change and to make them happen. *Philanthropic organizations and nonprofit groups can help develop student leaders by:*

- Funding training programs that develop student leaders on higher education policy issues
- Supporting organizations that work directly with students on campus as they identify potential student leaders and give them the resources they need to plan and organize initiatives that speak out on higher education policy
- Foster links among national groups that represent college students and campus-based student groups to share ideas and begin to develop a common voice on the student issues that resonate across campuses

*Institutions of higher learning can ensure the development of student leaders by:*

- Emphasizing leadership development through coursework and programming
- Creating avenues for working students and those who primarily take online courses to engage in student leadership, including online forums

*Student groups can ensure continued leadership by:*

- Engaging in outreach to fellow students that includes opportunities to take on a greater leadership role
- Building campaigns and institutions within each student group with an eye toward continuity beyond the tenure of the current officers

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Give students a place at the table in higher education decision making

To become a strong voice on higher education policy, students must be included in the conversations that lead to changes in institutional, federal, and state policy. This means they need access to decision makers at different institutions engaged in higher education policy or in funding higher education. *Specifically, students need consistent access to:*

- Congress and the Department of Education, both of which should ensure significant student representation on committees and panels such as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity and the Advisory

To become a strong voice on higher education policy, students must be included in the conversations that lead to changes in institutional, federal, and state policy.

Committee on Student Financial Assistance by including at least two student members, one of whom is elected by a national body that represents student governments such as the American Student Government Association, and one of whom has demonstrated experience dealing the particular policy issues the committee will discuss

- State policymakers, who should include student representatives, elected by their peers, on state higher education committees and boards such as those that set financial aid and university budget priorities
- State financial aid authorities, which should do direct outreach to student governments to educate them about the campus specific and statewide issues in financial assistance
- State legislators, who should include rights to shared governance for students in its regulations governing public higher education
- Philanthropic organizations and nonprofit higher education entities, which should host events that bring together student body representatives and leaders in the higher education community to discuss the challenges that face higher education from their two disparate perspectives

*Students can help assure their place in policy conversations by:*

- Lobbying the university administration or state legislature (where applicable) to adopt a commitment to shared governance
- Examining the context of the debates in which they engage to focus on the proper channels of power
- Gaining a measure of independence from university administration by securing funding from outside streams or directly from the student body, rather than relying on grants from the university

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## Help students engage the media

To encourage change in higher education, students often need to engage a wide audience. In the past, student activists set up tables on campus to recruit students,



but times have changed. The modern student voice must utilize social media and press outlets to get the word out about their causes and to recruit students and the general public. *To do that:*

- Postsecondary institutions should create social media platforms that allow students to communicate and organize campus events, and that allow for more direct and immediate communication between administrators and students on policy issues
- Philanthropic organizations should support training for student journalists to help them better report on higher education issues

*Students, for their part, can increase their media presence in a few ways:*

- Build relationships with the press, including student publications, to help them stay aware of the higher education policy issues that matter to students
- Developing social media sites that connect students to one another both on campus and across multiple universities to mobilize students and share ideas

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## Increase transparency around university decision making

Students need to be more fully informed of the issues and alternatives that surround university and government decisions on higher education policy. *Specifically:*

- Postsecondary institutions whenever possible should hold public forums to discuss important changes to tuition, fiscal policy, curriculum, or other major areas of the college's function.
- Congress should enable greater transparency around how colleges spend money by requiring institutions to submit more detailed information to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System about their revenues and expenses.
- Philanthropic organizations should organize a repository of articles and reports written by its grantees that would help students better understand higher education policy, and market the repository to student groups.

*Student groups can encourage greater transparency by:*

- Using student publications to investigate and publicize little-known information about university policymaking
- Lobbying federal and state governments for laws that require colleges to disclose more data about their tuition and financial aid policies as well as their revenue and spending practices

As tuition rises and public subsidies for higher education decrease, students are responsible for more and more of the funding that supports our colleges and universities. This greater financial responsibility makes it even more striking that students play only a supporting role—if any at all—in the decisions that govern the course of higher education policy.

The policy recommendations listed here require multiple players, including governments, philanthropic organizations, nonprofits, and students themselves to recognize that students deserve a stronger voice. But once we can agree on that, the changes necessary to amplify the student voice are remarkably straightforward.

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## About the authors

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## About the Cover Art

The cover photo features unemployed superhero 'The Master of Degrees' a character from the book, *The Adventures of Unemployed Man*, created by Gan Golan and Erich Origen, [www.unemployedman.com](http://www.unemployedman.com).

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