

Interview Analysis:
Furthering Research on Institutional and Student Costs in Higher Education

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Introduction

In this paper, I discuss an interview conducted with someone who serves as both a faculty member at an institution in the Northeast whose administrative roles include curriculum management and planning. They also are a member of the faculty senate and directly interface with the provost on many pivotal aspects of planning. The interviewee has almost 20 years of experience in teaching and several years experience in administrative planning. I specifically requested to speak with this individual as they are directly involved in areas where my solutions would directly impact and they have regular and excellent interactions with students.

When conducting this interview, the feeling was much closer to a mutual conversation. As a result, several questions I had intended to ask were left unanswered and several things that I hadn't anticipated had been discussed. A list of questions discussed is included in the appendices of this paper (Appendix A), including those I was unable to ask (Appendix B). The structure to this interview unfolded as follows: (1) I broadly explained this course, the purpose of my signature assignment, and how I landed on my topic, (2) the interviewee asked me to provide an overview of my initial findings and the reasoning for my approach, and (3) the remainder of our time was spent discussing immediate themes and findings, and opportunities to further my research.

In the discussion portion of this paper, I will illustrate a few examples where my research on cost solutions closely aligns with the experience of the interviewee, including the topic of endowment and how institutions make and use funds, textbooks and course materials, and wasting resources. In the revision and suggestions portion of this paper, I point to a few potential expansions of my research as introduced by the interviewee, including recreating a similar study

on textbook costs in my department, investigating current institutional support for textbooks, and exploring data collection and reporting issues.

Discussion

This discussion made it clear that the interviewee and myself share similar sentiments to the costs of higher education. When I shared the grounding data of my work on how much the average student spends and what the average financial aid package was, they agreed that the cost of higher education is a challenge, and a hot topic at that. At that point, I elaborated on indirect costs to institutions (software and supply costs) and indirect costs to students (books and food) as partial solutions to alleviate costs. Conversation also turned to the topics of factors of direct costs to institutions (instruction and endowment funds). Each time I introduced a topic, the interviewee would nod and take notes, as well as remark about how striking the data sets were.

One of the comments that stuck out to me was about the ethics of these costs. The interview made reference to a program of the institution in which faculty are given a budget that was primarily funded by student fees; upon not spending the complete budget, students would not receive the excess funds. This use-it-or-lose-it mentality was particularly troubling to them, as they described even the office of this program instructing faculty to spend it, “even if it means buying all the students ice cream” (Interviewee, personal communication, December 15, 2021). The interviewee described this moment as related to my research on how much revenue from tuition and fees actually pays instruction costs at an institution, as the two seem to be unequal.

In general, the interviewee pointed to similar discussions occurring within the faculty senate in conjunction with the provost. According to them, endowments and sources of institutional income were of particular interest, as this institution was heavily invested in Covid-19 testing and safety protocols which caused the senate to enquire about the funding of

those procedures. One discussion topic in the senate is eminently apparent in data direct from the institution: one way this institution is attempting to save costs on instruction is by moving away from a tenure system. The interviewee made a point of saying that their institution was grossly underpaying faculty for the area's costs of living. While tenure did not make my paper, initial research showed that tenure is often used as a method to cut instructional costs. The interviewee offered a different perspective, saying that in practice this evaluation did not hold true for their institution, and as a result, more teaching faculty part-time/adjunct faculty have been hired.

Another emergent similarity in our discussion was a recognition of textbooks as a pain point that can be addressed. This faculty member themselves does not use textbooks, and has not from the very beginning. If they did include textbooks, they were either free or rental through the library. They confirmed that this topic comes up for students and faculty alike in both senate, and curriculum and program meetings.

Revisions and Suggestions

The interviewee did not have any criticism for my work, but did make a note that it seemed like my solutions to the problems fell outside the scope of the problem itself, e.g. cutting costs for institutions by supplies and software in an effort to offer a solution to rising tuition costs. They acknowledged that this would have been a criticism had I not grounded my work in the notion that these solutions need to be easily attainable and manageable; otherwise, that was an area they would suggest I revisit.

With the notion of keeping solutions attainable, manageable, and “low-hanging fruit” (Interviewee, personal communication, December 15, 2021), the interviewee did offer ways I could further engage in research on this topic. One suggestion was to further evaluate resources for students at an institution. They explained a program that previously existed at their

institution, wherein a faculty member would submit a form to the bookstore so students could order books and a form to the library to ensure they had copies of the books available for students to take out. This program also entailed reporting if a book was required. The majority of this program was optional; however, if a book was required, faculty were required to submit the form to the library.

Another area they suggested I examine was to explore how data was collected at institutions and how that plays a role in budgetary management. Despite this individual's involvement in the faculty senate and as an administrator, the reported data with which they plan and pass resolutions is kept close to the chest. This is a fact that I found while researching as well, as I was often evaluating information with theoretical models rather than reported budget lines. While they mentioned it might be nearly impossible to do significant research on this over time, they did explain that continuing to bring up the issue of fair and accurate data collection and reporting would be a great way to further this research.

Subsequently, when I mentioned being interested in replicating a study similar to two of the studies of textbooks and costs I used in this report, they encouraged me to take a look at information directly in my unit that I could access at any time without needing to create and distribute a survey. They suggested I could gather data from the bookstore itself and data collected from department syllabi to see what books are being required for our students.

One question they did ask me was whether I thought it important to make the distinction between public and private institutions. During our conversation, we discussed the pros and cons of this question and ultimately came to the conclusion that there was no reason not to; however, there is room to do isolated reports and suggestions for each type of institution as they each present different and unique challenges.

Lastly, the final comment the interviewee made to me was that I had picked smart solutions, specifically referring to the supplies, software, books, and food solutions as they don't require major fundamental shifts in long term institution planning like other more drastic solutions (like instruction and tuition costs). By expressing this, they also hoped that if I didn't make that a part of my introduction, I should do so for further research, as it would sell and emphasize the attainable aspect of my research.

Conclusion

Speaking with this interviewee was a great pleasure; not only as they are someone I respect and admire, but also because the conversation was incredibly insightful and reaffirming. They confirmed that my proposed solutions were good choices, and offered ways I could take them further. The interviewee also expressed a genuine interest in wanting to know more about the kinds of solutions I could offer in addition to those already described in my work.

The fact that the topic of my work has and continues to be discussed at faculty senate and curriculum planning meetings indicated to both the interviewer and myself that I am on the right track. Should I take their suggestion of examining data collection and reporting, or conducting an evaluation of course materials in my department, I feel prepared to continue and improve my work. I hope to continue to reference this piece and use it as a foundation for my work going forward in this program.

Appendix A

Do students talk about the costs of higher education with you?

Does the university talk about the costs of higher education with you?

What do you see as the university's biggest challenge to reduce university costs? To reduce student costs?

Do you do anything to support students in your class regarding their costs?

Is it possible to move to free textbooks or textbook alternatives at an institutional level? What are the challenges to this?

What are your suggestions to improve costs for both the university and students?

Appendix B

Is it possible to move to a paperless system, at least at an institutional level? What are the challenges to this?

How integral are on campus office spaces for faculty and staff? Do students discuss access to these spaces with you?

Do faculty discuss the costs of higher education with you?