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There Is No College Cost CrisisBy *STANLEY FISH*

Stanley Fish on
education, law and
society.

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There is no college cost crisis. That at least is the conclusion reached by the economists Robert B. Archibald and David H. Feldman in their new book, [“Why Does College Cost So Much?”](#) The title question is a teaser, for the book’s message is that it doesn’t. In fact, say the authors, “for most families higher education is more affordable than it was in the past.”

Archibald and Feldman build their analysis of college costs in opposition to what they call the “new orthodoxy” or the “dysfunctionality narrative.” In that narrative, repeated almost religiously by critics and politicians, colleges and universities have “drifted away from their social mission,” surrendered to the false god of research, and engaged in an “arms race” for more prestigious scholars and ever-glitzier student unions. As a result, “their costs have sprawled out of control” and “the college degree, an essential entry ticket to the modern economy” has become “increasingly out of reach for families with middle-class incomes.”

In short the conditions everyone ritually complains about have an internal cause: if colleges and universities find themselves in a bad financial place, they have only themselves and their irresponsible practices to blame.

That’s just wrong, declare Archibald and Feldman. The causes of the increase in college costs (an increase that has not, they contend, put college “out of reach”) are external; colleges are responding, as they must, to changes they cannot ignore and still provide a quality product. Chief among these is the change in the sophistication and cost of the technology that has at once transformed the setting of higher education and become one of the areas of knowledge higher education must impart to students. Students expect to be instructed in the new technologies, and that instruction requires their installation, and then as new refinements emerge, their re-installation. “[A] modern university must provide students with an up-to-date education that familiarizes students with the techniques and associated machinery that are used in the workplace the students must enter.”

Were colleges and universities to strike a Luddite stance and hold out for pencil, paper and blackboard instruction, they would “in effect be guilty of educational malpractice.” When it comes to incurring these new expenses, they “do not have a real choice.” In no sense, then, are changes in price “driven by any pathology in the higher education industry.”

But shouldn't the introduction of technology reduce costs by creating greater efficiencies?

Yes, answer Archibald and Feldman, if the industry in question produces durable goods on an assembly-line model or offers services that can be delivered by relatively unskilled labor aided by new devices. But in industries like education, medicine and the law, where advances in technology lead to a demand for ever-more-highly-educated personnel and mechanization is frowned upon because of a concern with quality, technological advances will raise costs rather than reduce them. If you understand the "increase in the intensity of equipment use and in the skill requirements for those who work" in the academy, you will also understand why "these changes have increased higher education costs more than the cost of most [but not all] goods and services."

Not, however, to the point of making the product unavailable to middle-class buyers. This is the second prong of the "dysfunctionality narrative" Archibald and Feldman are at pains to debunk. Here their target is a way of framing the issue. Usually the question asked is, "What percentage of a family's income goes to the cost of higher education?" Archibald and Feldman prefer to "ask instead whether the amount left over after subtracting the cost of college is rising or falling over time." The answer they give (buttressed by statistical tables) is "rising": what their data show is that "over long stretches of time, college costs have been rising at a faster pace than income per worker, yet the average worker's actual dollar income has gone up by more than the costs, leaving more resources on the family table to spend on other things."

In the story the "new orthodoxy" tells, "prestige competition and gold plating needlessly push up costs . . . which then cuts off access to higher education." "We think," Archibald and Feldman conclude, "this story is about as wrong as it is possible to be." If the important figure is "the difference between income and the cost of college" then "by that criterion there is no national affordability problem" and "talk of a college cost crisis is unnecessarily alarmist."

In the spirit of full disclosure, let me say that my enthusiasm for Archibald's and Feldman's analysis is in one respect personal. In 2003 I wrote three columns ([one in this newspaper](#) and two in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)) attacking, not to say excoriating, a report written, or at least signed, by Republican congressmen John Boehner (then a mere foot-soldier) and Howard McKeon, titled "The College Cost Crisis."

What Boehner and McKeon offer is the "dysfunctionality narrative," and every once in a while Archibald and Feldman put up a quotation from their report to use as a piñata. My criticism was a proto version of theirs, absent the massive data and the economic sophistication. Boehner and McKeon, I said, take no account of "changes in the real costs of doing business — changes the universities did not impose, but changes they must live with."

As a result, I concluded, "the statistics they invoke with such a flourish are meaningless, or, rather, are meaningful only within the bizarre and ignorant assumption that everything in

the world of higher education is the same as it was in 1970,” when “student registration was still being done manually in the gym.” As a dean who encountered the rising costs of personnel, laboratory equipment, security, compliance demands, information systems and much more every day, I knew I had it basically right, but I am happy to ride (belatedly) on the coattails of people who really know what they’re talking about.

That does not mean of course that all’s right with the educational world. Archibald and Feldman say little about the other concerns — the growing army of adjuncts, the effects of tenure in a world without mandatory retirement, the widening disparity between public and private institutions, the increasing corporatization of the academy — that are taken up in [the books I discussed last week](#).

But by giving the lie to the “dysfunctionality narrative,” they arm every college president with a ready reply to the next legislator who, following the lead of Boehner and McKeon (and indeed of every politician since Ronald Reagan), demands that colleges and universities reform themselves from within. By taking what they call the “aerial view” — looking to “economy wide” factors — and rejecting the “close up view” of the university imagined “in a vacuum,” Archibald and Feldman allow us to say that at least in the area of costs the fault lies not in ourselves, but in the stars.