

Study: As college costs rise, grants for students erode

By Robin Estrin
The Associated Press

BOSTON — The cost of college continues to rise as available federal grant money erodes, putting higher education out of reach for many low-income American families, a study released Tuesday showed.

Student grants are covering a significantly diminishing proportion of college pricetags. Pell grants — the major federal funding source for low-income students — provide about half of

what they did 20 years ago, according to the study.

In the 1976-77 school year, the average Pell grant covered 19 percent of the cost of attending a private, four-year institution, and 39 percent of the price of a public four-year school. In 1996-97 — the most recent year available for the study — the average grant covered 9 percent for private schools, and 22 percent for public.

Even more striking, the maximum Pell grant — given to the neediest students — fell from cov-

ering 35 percent of private college costs in 1976-77 to 13 percent in 1996-97; for public schools, it dropped from covering 72 percent of the price to 34 percent, the study said.

If low-income students don't attend community college, they can't afford to go to college at all, said Thomas Parker, senior vice president of The Education Resources Institute, a Boston-based nonprofit guarantor of privately issued student loans, and one of the two groups that released the report.

"What we like to think is we have a system where people have both access and choice, but what we're rapidly developing is a system where people have access but not choice," he said.

The average Pell grant award declined by 23 percent — adjusting for inflation — over two decades, but college prices rose by 49 percent, and family incomes crept up by just 10 percent over the same period.

In 1996-97, the maximum Pell grant available was \$2,470 for

qualifying students. In 1997-98, it went up to \$2,700 and is at \$3,000 for the current year.

"Even with those increases, the bottom line is the net price still increases for most families, particularly for the lowest-income students," said Jamie Merisotis, president of The Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington, D.C., and co-author of the report.

About 3.6 million of the nation's 14 million college students receive Pell grants.

Cigarette smoking on the rise at colleges

By Loran Neergaard
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Cigarette smoking is on the rise among college students, jumping 28 percent in four years and causing health advocates to warn the nation may face more tobacco-caused disease.

"The rise in this group is really an alarming sign," said Henry Wechsler of Harvard University, whose study appears in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

Wechsler's findings aren't a surprise — smoking already had risen among teenagers by 32 percent in the 1990s. So once those teens hit college, the rates among college students were sure to rise, too.

But the findings show that health officials must target college students to try to get them to quit, said Dr. Donald Sharp of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Until now, college students largely have been ignored by anti-tobacco programs. Historically, they were far less likely to smoke than less educated Americans, plus most smokers begin before they reach age 18. So health workers had focused more on persuading children never to try cigarettes and helping older smokers quit, Sharp said.

"Because of the highly addictive nature of nicotine, very few of those kids who became regular smokers in middle school and high school quit" by college, he said. "They will suffer a much higher rate of smoking-related ill-

ness and death as a result unless effective cessation can be provided to that group."

Cigarette smoking is the leading preventable cause of disease and death. The government says it kills more than 400,000 Americans a year. Smoking causes a host of health problems, from lung cancer and heart disease to impotence.

Some 3,000 teen-agers begin smoking every day. The question is what was happening to people a little older — the 18- to 24-year-olds now in college.

Wechsler compared surveys of over 14,000 students at 116 colleges in 1993 and again in 1997. Some 28.5 percent of college students smoked last year, up from 22.3 percent in 1993, he reported.

The vast majority started smoking in high school — only 11 percent of college students had their first cigarette after age 18. But 28 percent moved from occasionally trying cigarettes in high school to becoming regular smokers in college, a finding the CDC called worrisome.

Half of college smokers reported they had tried to quit in the previous year, and 18 percent had made five or more attempts at kicking the addiction.

The findings stress the need for colleges to offer more smoke-free dormitories, because students might go without that cigarette if they can't smoke it conveniently, Wechsler said. He is about to study how smoke-free U.S. colleges are.

Churches that endorse gay marriage excluded

By Lori Johnston
The Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ga. — Saying they didn't want same-sex marriages performed in their churches, Southern Baptists in Georgia voted Tuesday to exclude congregations that "endorse" homosexuality.

The Rev. J. Gerald Harris, new president of the denomination's state convention, said Southern Baptists welcome gay individuals but can't allow churches to advocate their behavior.

"The unanimous verdict of scripture is that practicing homosexuality is a sin," said Harris, from Eastside Baptist Church in Marietta. "Love ... must not compromise the church's allegiance to scripture."

Delegates voted to warn churches they should not knowingly take any action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior if they want to remain in the convention, the denomina-

tion's second largest in the nation behind Texas.

The Rev. J. Robert White, the Georgia convention's executive director, will oversee investigation of churches. If there is a complaint, White will meet with the pastor and the convention will ask the church to come into compliance or leave the denomination.

Several of more than 2,400 church representatives in Columbus this week for the meeting spoke against the measure.

"To speak on this very issue is perilous," said Bill Self of John's Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta. "I want to ask one simple question. This year, the homosexuals. Who's next, churches that receive African-Americans? Churches that allow women in the ministry?"

Also Tuesday, the group rejected a provision to exclude churches that engage in "divisive" and "disruptive" charismatic worship, such as speaking in tongues.

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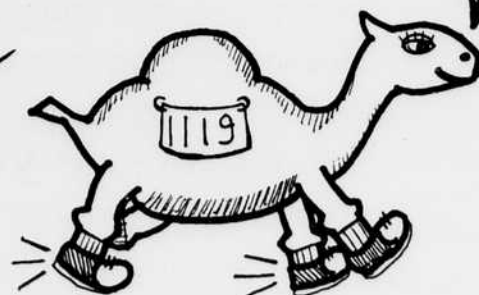
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