



TITLE:

Debt by Degrees

CATEGORY:

Images/Graphics/Interactives

ENTRANTS:

- Annie Waldman
- Sisi Wei

ELEMENTS:

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2. **Colleges Flush With Cash Saddle Poorest Students With Debt (9/12/15)**
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Debt by Degrees

Which colleges help poor students most?

by Sisi Wei and Annie Waldman, ProPublica
Sept. 12, 2015

New data from the U.S. Department of Education shows in unprecedented detail how much federal student loan debt college students from low-income families are being saddled with. Use this interactive database to search among 6,000 schools in the U.S. to see how much they support their poorest students financially.

New [Head to Head: Which School Helps Poor Students More?](#)

Find Colleges by Name or

See Top Colleges

Use the menus below to change the school categories.

Percentage of Students Who Received Pell Grants »

Highest			Lowest		
1.	70.8%	Clark Atlanta University	101.	6.2%	Washington University in St Louis
2.	60.8%	Union Institute & University	100.	10.2%	Harvard University
3.	57.1%	Our Lady of the Lake University	99.	10.6%	California Institute of Technology
4.	57.0%	California Institute of Integral Studies	98.	11.3%	Tufts University
5.	51.8%	Barry University	97.	11.8%	University of Notre Dame
6.	51.1%	Regent University	96.	11.9%	University of Dayton
7.	48.7%	National Louis University	95.	12.0%	Wake Forest University
8.	48.1%	Trinity International University-Illinois	94.	12.2%	Princeton University
9.	47.3%	Spalding University	93.	12.3%	Catholic University of America
10.	46.5%	University of La Verne	92.	12.7%	Yale University

Avg. Cost for Low-Income Students »

Lowest			Highest		
1.	\$3,516	Stanford University	100.	\$31,970	Catholic University of America
2.	\$3,847	University of Pennsylvania	99.	\$31,003	Lynn University
3.	\$3,897	Harvard University	98.	\$29,006	Clark Atlanta University
4.	\$5,234	Brown University	97.	\$28,398	The New School
5.	\$5,554	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	96.	\$28,162	Hofstra University
6.	\$5,932	Princeton University	95.	\$27,015	Florida Institute of Technology
7.	\$6,871	Duke University	94.	\$26,425	Baylor University
8.	\$7,411	Vanderbilt University	93.	\$26,228	Worcester Polytechnic Institute
9.	\$7,596	Yale University	92.	\$26,163	Saint Louis University
10.	\$7,781	Washington University in St Louis	91.	\$25,738	St John's University-New York

Avg. Discount for Low-Income Students »

Highest			Lowest		
1.	94%	Stanford University	100.	15%	Clark Atlanta University
2.	94%	University of Pennsylvania	99.	16%	Wilmington University
3.	93%	Harvard University	98.	21%	Union Institute & University
4.	91%	Brown University	97.	32%	Alliant International University
5.	90%	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	96.	36%	Lynn University
6.	89%	Princeton University	95.	38%	Nova Southeastern University
7.	88%	Duke University	94.	38%	Regent University
8.	88%	Vanderbilt University	93.	41%	Catholic University of America
9.	88%	Washington University in St Louis	92.	41%	Maryville University of Saint Louis
10.	87%	Yale University	91.	43%	Brigham Young University-Provo

Median Federal Debt of Pell Grantees »

Lowest			Highest		
1.	\$3,315	Princeton University	59.	\$29,150	Wake Forest University
2.	\$7,500	Dartmouth College	58.	\$28,400	Syracuse University
3.	\$8,313	Florida Institute of Technology	57.	\$28,250	Marquette University
4.	\$10,646	Brigham Young University-Provo	56.	\$27,750	Duquesne University
5.	\$10,725	Cornell University	55.	\$27,613	George Washington University
6.	\$14,501	Lynn University	54.	\$27,250	Andrews University
7.	\$15,000	Wilmington University	50.	\$27,000	Boston University
8.	\$16,523	Trevecca Nazarene University	50.	\$27,000	Northeastern University
9.	\$18,048	Union Institute & University	50.	\$27,000	Pepperdine University
10.	\$18,689	Saint Mary's University of Minnesota	50.	\$27,000	University of Dayton

Source: U.S. Department of Education [College Scorecard Data](#); NACUBO Endowment Study 2014; Pell graduation rate data from [The Education Trust](#)

Additional research and development by [Al Shaw](#) and [Ryann Grochowski Jones](#). Spanish translation by [Cecilia Reyes](#). Chinese translation by [Yue Qiu](#).

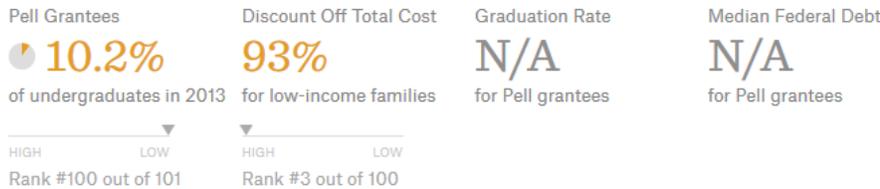
Caveats: [Read more about this data and its limitations »](#)

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Find Colleges by Name or

Harvard University

Cambridge, Mass. | www.harvard.edu | Endowment: \$32.3 billion (2013)



Type
Private not-for-profit, 4-year

Classification
Research University

Compare
[Head to Head With Other Schools »](#)
[Schools in Massachusetts »](#)

Although higher education has long been seen as a class equalizer, not everybody can take on the debt necessary to afford it. The Pell Grant program was established in 1965 to help poor students attend college without taking on loans that limit their options later in life, but the program has not kept pace with the rapid growth of tuition. Some schools with large endowments use their resources to make tuition cheaper for poor students, while others expect even the poorest students to take on substantial debt.

- During School
- At Graduation
- Years Later
- About the School

Rankings
This school is ranked against other Private not-for-profit, 4-year Research Universities.

■ = Specific to Low-Income Students

During School

Though Pell Grant money is crucial, attending college can still require large student loans if a prospective student doesn't choose a school carefully. *Data only for students who receive any federal aid.*



[This School's Price Calculator»](#)

At Graduation

Especially if students are not pursuing potentially lucrative majors, such as so-called STEM disciplines or law, their school choices can have a big effect on their income and ability to pay off college debt. Recent graduates can fall behind on their loans quickly, and unlike other kinds of debt, student loans are not forgiven through bankruptcy.



Drop-Outs Have Debt Too

Students who drop out of school still have to pay back the loans they took out. This can be a double whammy for them: With large debts to pay off and no college degrees, their career options are limited and their expected earnings are lower.

Median Federal Debt of Students Who Drop Out

\$12,500

Graduation Rate (All)

97.5%

within six years

HIGH LOW
Rank #2 out of 99

Graduation Rate (Pell Students)

N/A

within six years

Difference

N/A

within six years

Years Later

The choices 18 year olds make about where to go to school — and how much debt to take on to pay for it — matter enormously over the long haul. Although everybody knows this instinctively, the U.S. Department of Education worked with Treasury Department data to work out the details, including, for each school, average salary and debt levels 10 years after students enter school.

How Graduates Fare 3 Years After Graduation

A new measure, the nonrepayment rate, includes all students who are unable to pay off any of the principal on their student loans. The traditional measure, the default rate, does not include students who may be in deferment or forbearance. *Federal loans only.*

Nonrepayment Rate (All)

16.0%

3-Year Rate, Federal Loans

HIGH LOW
Rank #78 out of 101

Nonrepayment Rate (Pell Students)

38.8%

3-Year Rate, Federal Loans

HIGH LOW
Rank #97 out of 100

Default Rate

1.9%

3-Year Cohort, Federal Loans

HIGH LOW
Rank #25 out of 101

How Students Fare 10 Years After Entering School

This includes salary data starting 10 years after a student enters school. Typically this means 6 years after graduation, but some students take longer to complete school. *Data only for students who have received federal aid.*

Median monthly debt payments

\$66.61

(10-year amortization plan)

Median Income (2011)

\$87,200

Students working and not enrolled

Earns \$25k or Less Per Year (2011)

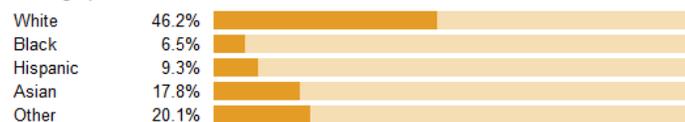
10.2%

Includes unemployed and not looking for work

About the School

In 2013, Harvard University had a **6%** admissions rate. It had **7,278** undergraduate students, **5%** of which were part-time. **2.9%** of its undergraduates took out federal loans.

Demographics



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Find Colleges by Name or

Head to Head: Which School Helps Poor Students More?

Compare the 2013 performance of any two schools on how well they support their low-income students. [Start over](#) at any time.

Try Another School		Try Another School	
<input type="text" value="ex: Harvard University, Vassar College"/>		<input type="text" value="ex: Harvard University, Vassar College"/>	
<h3>Harvard University</h3> <p>Private not-for-profit, 4-year Research University Endowment: \$32.3 billion</p> <p>TIE</p> <p>See this school's full data »</p>		<h3>Princeton University</h3> <p>Private not-for-profit, 4-year Research University Endowment: \$18.2 billion</p> <p>TIE</p> <p>See this school's full data »</p>	
<p>Pell Grantees</p> <p>10.2%</p> <p>of undergraduates in 2013</p>	<p>WIN</p>	<p>Pell Grantees</p> <p>12.2%</p> <p>of undergraduates in 2013</p> <p>Princeton University enrolled 2.02 percentage points more Pell grantees than Harvard University.</p>	
<p>Low-Income Students Paid</p> <p>\$3,897</p> <p>per year, on average</p> <p>Low-income students at Harvard University paid \$2,035 less than students at Princeton University.</p>	<p>WIN</p>	<p>Low-Income Students Paid</p> <p>\$5,932</p> <p>per year, on average</p>	
<p>Discount Off Total Cost</p> <p>93%</p> <p>for low-income families</p> <p>The discount Harvard University gave low-income families was 3.98 percentage points higher than at Princeton University.</p>	<p>WIN</p>	<p>Discount Off Total Cost</p> <p>89%</p> <p>for low-income families</p>	
<p>Median Federal Debt</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>for Pell grantees</p>		<p>Median Federal Debt</p> <p>\$3,315</p> <p>for Pell grantees</p>	
<p>Nonrepayment Rate (Pell Students)</p> <p>38.8%</p> <p>3-Year Rate, Federal Loans</p>	<p>WIN</p>	<p>Nonrepayment Rate (Pell Students)</p> <p>13.9%</p> <p>3-Year Rate, Federal Loans</p> <p>Ten years after enrollment, the percentage of Pell grantees at Princeton University that were unable to pay back even \$1 of their loan principal was 24.95 percentage points lower than Pell grantees at Harvard University.</p>	

[See this school's full data »](#)

[See this school's full data »](#)

Colleges Flush With Cash Saddle Poorest Students With Debt

A ProPublica analysis of newly available federal data shows that some of the nation's wealthiest colleges are leaving their poorest students with plenty of debt.

by Annie Waldman and Sisi Wei, ProPublica
Sep. 12, 2015, 2:06 p.m.



New York University's commencement ceremony in 2012. (Melanie Stetson Freeman/The Christian Science Monitor via Getty)

New York University is among the country's wealthiest schools. Backed by its \$3.5 billion endowment as well as its considerable fundraising prowess, the school has built campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai financed by foreign governments, is investing billions in SoHo real estate, and given its star faculty loans to buy summer homes.

But the university does less than many other schools when it comes to one thing: helping its poor students.

A ProPublica analysis based on new data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that students from low-income families graduate from NYU saddled with huge federal loans. The school's Pell Grant recipients – students from families that make less than \$30,000 a year – owe an average of \$23,250 in federal loans after graduation.

That's more federal loan debt than low-income students take on at for-profit giant University of Phoenix, though

NYU graduates have higher earnings and default less on their debt.

NYU is not the only university with a billion-dollar endowment to leave its poorest students with heavy debt loads. More than a quarter of the nation's 60 wealthiest universities leave their low-income students owing an average of more than \$20,000 in federal loans.

At the University of Southern California, which has a \$4.6 billion endowment, low-income students graduate with slightly more debt than NYU's graduates: \$23,375. At Boston University (\$1.5 billion endowment), it's \$27,000, and at Wake Forest University (\$1.1 billion endowment) low-income students graduate with \$29,150 in debt.

This new data on student debt is drawn from numbers that the Obama administration assembled as part of a planned effort to create grades for every college. In the face of fierce lobbying from universities, the administration backed away, but has made much of the data public on a new website called College Scorecard. ProPublica has used that material to create Debt By Degrees, an interactive database that allows you to search information for almost 7,000 schools. The data provides an unprecedented level of detail on the financial burden that the poorest college students face, showing for the first time how much federal debt poor students take on compared to their wealthier peers, and how well these students are able to repay their loans. The database also shows how much graduates earn on average after leaving school.

The implications of these numbers can be far-reaching. Studies have shown that even small debts can increase a student's chances of dropping out, particularly for minorities and low-income students. Also, federal loans, which are typically capped at \$27,000 over four years, often don't cover the full expense of college. Many

students also take on private bank loans or work jobs outside school.

“Student debt is not the same to every borrower,” said Mark Huelsman, a senior analyst at Demos, a public policy nonprofit. “It can look a lot different to a first generation student from a very modest economic background than to someone going to graduate school getting a law degree.”

Indeed, undergraduates take a fraction of the loans of graduate students but default at much higher rates. Debt can put low-income young adults at a disadvantage for years to come, limiting a graduate’s ability to save, get a mortgage, or get the job they aspire to.

“At the end of the day, you’re talking about households that don’t have nearly as much wealth to fall back on,” said Huelsman.

Rebecca Arthur wanted nothing more than to study photography at Tisch, NYU’s arts school. Her mother, however, made less than \$25,000 a year working at a nursing home, so Arthur knew the school’s four-year price tag of over \$250,000 would be a stretch. When Arthur was accepted, she was shocked – not only because she had gotten into her dream school, but also because the school only offered modest financial aid.

“The first bill was \$32,000 and it was more than my mom made in a year,” she said. “Why would they accept me if they knew I couldn’t afford it?”

Arthur tried to crowdfund the remaining amount of her tuition, but it was only when her mother died a month before school started that NYU agreed to take a second look at her financial aid package. Although they increased her aid, she works four jobs and expects to graduate with over \$24,000 in loans.

“The one downside to NYU is that money is always a big problem,” said Arthur, who is now a sophomore at the university. “People that really want [to go to NYU] and deserve it shouldn’t have to fight for it.”

In response to recent criticism of its financial priorities, NYU says it has more than doubled financial aid from 2002-2012 and that average student debt has decreased significantly in the past five years. The school also enrolls a greater percentage of Pell Grant recipients than other elite schools. Finally, NYU points out that its endowment is actually quite modest on a per-student basis, since NYU has far more students than many other elite universities.

“NYU is deeply concerned about the issues of cost and debt,” John Beckman, NYU’s vice president for public affairs, told ProPublica. “NYU has made tremendous strides in improving financial aid.” NYU’s full response can be found here.

While NYU students average debt from both federal and private loans has gone down in the past five years, it’s about the same as a decade ago. And though NYU’s financial aid increased 138 percent from 2002-2012, its revenue from tuition and fees has increased 91 percent. Faculty and students have protested NYU’s \$6 billion expansion plan, saying more should be spent on financial aid.

A government report released today along with the data noted just how wide a disparity there can be in the prices poor students pay at competitor schools: Poor students pay an average of \$8,086 per year at Columbia University (\$8.2 billion endowment) versus \$25,441 at NYU.

“Schools talk so much about how they’re about helping low-income students,” said Stephen Burd, a senior policy analyst at New America Foundation. “But their words and actions are so different.”

Overall, students at nonprofit universities fare far better than those at for-profit schools and community colleges. One recent study shows that students at public and nonprofit schools typically have lower default rates and higher earnings.

Out of the nearly 2,000 nonprofit colleges that ProPublica analyzed, a handful of wealthy schools do particularly well in serving the needs of low-income students.

Vassar College, with an endowment of close to \$1 billion, charges its poorest students a quarter of what NYU does, and they graduate with less than half the debt.

Only a decade ago, Vassar looked little different than NYU. However, in 2006, the school hired a new president, Catharine Bond Hill, an academic who specializes in college access and affordability. During her first few years, Hill instituted need-blind admissions, accepting students regardless of their financial background. She also created a policy of replacing loans with grants to poorer students. And to bolster low-income applicants to the school, she initiated an aggressive recruiting campaign in poorer neighborhoods, partnering with pre-existing college prep programs.

After 10 years, these changes have made Vassar one of the most affordable colleges in the country for low-income students. Today, over 20 percent of Vassar students receive Pell Grants. That's double the percentage of low-income students of a decade ago.

“Schools that have the resources should be giving out more in need-based grant aid,” Hill told ProPublica.

Other schools that have helped level the playing field for low-income students include Amherst College and Williams College, both in Western Massachusetts. Nearly 20 percent of students at these schools receive Pell Grants and they graduate with less than \$10,000 of federal loans. Berea College in Kentucky charges no tuition and only accepts low-income students.

Vassar's Hill told ProPublica that other wealthy schools need to do more to recruit low-income students and to make college affordable for them. A White House report that accompanied today's data release notes that poor kids are often discouraged by schools' sticker prices, and do not know that they might qualify for financial aid.

“We know there are talented students out there and recent work has shown there are ways to get them into our pools,” Hill said.

Harvard (\$35.9 billion endowment), Princeton (\$20.9 billion endowment), and Yale (\$23.9 billion endowment) all give generous support and even free tuition to low-income students. But they do not enroll many of them. At Harvard, only 10 percent of the students receive Pell Grants.

Asked about their modest number of low-income students, a Harvard official said that school is committed to enrolling the best students, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Co-author Sisi Wei was a paid adjunct professor at NYU in spring 2015.

Sept. 14, 2015: *We clarified two parts of this story: One to remove the implication that NYU's endowment paid for the Abu Dhabi and Shanghai campuses, the other to be more specific about the time period we used in calculating the growth in NYU's financial aid.*

September 15, 2015: *We have further clarified that NYU's Abu Dhabi and Shanghai campuses are financed by foreign governments. We have also detailed the difference between the growth in NYU's aid and its revenue from tuition.*

As Pope Pushes to Help the Poor, Catholic Universities Leave Them Behind

Many Catholic colleges leave low-income students with big debts. And wealthy Catholic schools that provide generous support don't enroll many poor students.

by Annie Waldman, ProPublica
Sep. 22, 2015, 10:33 a.m.



Pope Francis is scheduled to speak at Catholic University of America this week. The school's poorest students pay over \$31,000 a year in tuition, even after discounts from scholarships. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

Pope Francis has made serving the poor a central tenet of his papacy. “Wealth makes us poor,” he told Cuban worshippers on Sunday, urging them not to forget “the smallest, the most abandoned.”

As the pope makes his first visit to the United States, he might want to reiterate that message to the nation's Catholic colleges.

Six of the top 20 nonprofit colleges that are most expensive for low-income students are Catholic institutions, according to a ProPublica analysis of recently released federal data. At almost half of all Catholic colleges, low-income students graduate with more than \$20,000 in federal loans. (See our Debt by Degrees interactive, which shows how American colleges compare in how much federal student loan debt students accumulate.)

At Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., where Pope Francis is scheduled to speak on Wednesday, the school's poorest students pay over \$31,000 a year

in tuition, even after discounts from scholarships — more than any other research university in the nation. Students also graduate with a significant amount of debt: \$26,000. And just 12 percent of its students are low-income.

Gerald Beyer, a Christian ethics professor from Villanova University said schools should be doing more. “Empowering the poor is a key part of Catholic social teaching, and education is an essential means of achieving this goal,” he said. “Catholic institutions need to rethink their own policies.”

Several schools, including Catholic University, said financial struggles have limited their ability to provide aid. Catholic University recently laid off a handful of staff members. The school also points to its relatively modest endowment: \$308 million.

“We are unfortunately not a school with an endowment that starts with a B,” said Christopher Lydon, vice president for enrollment management and marketing at Catholic University. (Last year, the Hechinger Report also explored the lack of financial aid to poor students at Catholic University and other Catholic schools.)

Notre Dame, Boston College, and Georgetown — all Catholic schools with endowments worth more than a billion dollars — offer more generous financial aid to their poorest students.

But like Catholic University, the schools don't enroll many of them. The percentage of students who receive Pell grants — federal grants for students whose families typically earn under \$30,000 — is less than 14 percent at each of the schools. Nonprofit four-year colleges on average have around 40 percent Pell grant recipients.

The wealthier Catholic universities say that they are

working hard to enroll more low-income students. Georgetown and Boston College have need-blind admissions and guarantee to meet the full needs of students through financial aid.

Notre Dame, which has an \$8 billion endowment, recently announced a \$20 million fund to cover college expenses for low-income students. The school also has begun to enroll undocumented students and give them funds to match Pell grants, for which they are ineligible.

“Notre Dame is devoting considerable resources to attracting and, as importantly, supporting students from low socioeconomic households,” said the school’s spokesman, Dennis K. Brown.

Some Catholic universities with modest resources stand out for serving the poor.

Just down the road from Catholic University sits Trinity Washington, which has some well-known graduates, including Rep. Nancy Pelosi. The women’s university has a tiny \$11 million endowment. But nearly 65 percent of its students receive Pell grants. The poorest students graduate with on average \$16,000 of debt from federal loans.

Trinity Washington’s president, Patricia McGuire, believes that other Catholic schools should follow a similar path.

“There’s a whole group of schools that want to be in the Ivy Leagues and want to be considered prestigious, and then there’s the rest of us who believe education is not about competition,” said McGuire. “Every institution needs to examine its own conscience about whether it could do more for students on the margins.”

Anthony Carnevale, a professor at Georgetown and the director of the university’s Center on Education and the Workforce, says the lack of low-income students is being driven by college ratings and competition for high-performing applicants.

“Christianity, let alone Catholicism, is supposed to be about taking care of each other and throwing the money changers out of the temple, but Jesus didn’t have to run a college,” said Carnevale. “The only way for colleges to survive is to become more and more selective, and in this country, it means whiter and wealthier.”

Update, Sept. 25, 2015: After this article published, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities offered a statement saying that the article “presented a biased

and inaccurate depiction of Catholic higher education in the United States.” It does not assert any misstatements of fact. Here is the association’s full statement.

Reporting Recipe: How to Investigate Student Debt at Your College

Here are five stories you can do using ProPublica's interactive database, *Debt by Degrees*. Each one comes complete with easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions.

by Annie Waldman and Sisi Wei, ProPublica
Oct. 13, 2015, 12:15 p.m.



(AP Photo/Sue Ogrcocki)

Student debt has tripled over the past decade to \$1.2 trillion, with more than a quarter of former students struggling to make payments. But until a few weeks ago, there was very little public data on how well students fare at individual schools.

That changed in September after the government publicly released a massive trove of data on student debt and ProPublica published *Debt by Degrees*, an interactive database that allows anyone to look up over 7,000 schools and see how well low-income students do at each school.

Using our database, we've written about how some wealthy colleges leave poor students with big debts and how many Catholic universities do too.

So how can you report on student debt at your school? Here are five story ideas to help jumpstart your own investigation:

1. As Tuition at Your School Goes Up, Poor Students May Be Left Behind

Colleges are not required to report data on the income distribution of their student body.

However, schools are required to report the percentage of their students that receive Pell grants — students from families that typically make less than \$30,000 a year. This figure is widely accepted by researchers and academics as a proxy for determining which students are low-income.

The recently released government data provides new detail on how low-income students (Pell recipients) do compared to their wealthier peers. Using *Debt by Degrees*, you can look up all of the data on low-income students, which is highlighted in our database with orange text.

How to report on this:

Look up what percentage of students receive Pell Grants at your school. Some schools are better at enrolling low-income students than others. For example, only 11.3 percent of Tufts' student body receive Pell grants. Tufts' percentage is low compared to other research universities, as they are ranked 98th out of 101 schools.

- **Go talk to students and the admissions office.** Don't stop at the data — find students who are Pell recipients and ask them about their college experience. Then talk to the admissions office. Does your school actively recruit low-income students? Is your school "need blind," meaning do they accept students regardless of their socioeconomic background? What extra resources does your

school have for low-income students?

- **Report on the discount that your school gives to its poorest students.** Schools are required to publicly report how much students actually pay on average after grants and scholarship aid. In *Debt by Degrees*, the figure is broken down by income group, enabling you to compare how much the poorest students pay on average to the wealthiest. We show the discount for the poorest students and using the data, you can also compute the discount for the wealthiest students. Or see how your school's discount for low-income students ranks against similar schools.
- **Compare the graduation rate of low-income students to the rest of the student body.** For years, this data was only publicly available if requested by a prospective or current student at a school. But recently, the nonprofit Education Trust collected the graduation rates of Pell recipients at over 1,000 schools, which are now available in our interactive database. At Hofstra University, for example, students who receive Pell grants graduate at a much lower rate (53 percent) than the rest of the school (62.1 percent). At your school, are low-income students graduating at a lower or higher rate than their peers? Are there resources at your school to help low-income students navigate and graduate college?
- **Compare how much debt low-income students take on compared to the rest of the school.** Some schools are able to better assist low-income students so that they don't have to graduate with a lot of debt. Low-income students at Vassar College, for example, graduate with \$9,547 of debt, compared to the overall school average of \$17,545. How much debt do low-income students graduate with at your school?
- **And then, again, interview students and graduates!** Once you have the numbers, interview graduates of your university about their debt load. Ask them about their financial aid process, as well as their experience repaying their loans after graduation.

2. Not All State Schools Are Equal

If you attend a public university, look at how students at your school fare compared to those at other state colleges. State schools were created to be the most affordable option for local students, regardless of their economic background. However, ProPublica found that over the past two decades, public universities have gradually decreased the percentage of institutional aid given to low-income students while increasing the

amount given to wealthier students. For poor students, the diminishing amount of aid has become a substantial barrier to entry.

- Is this happening at your school or at other state colleges?
- What kind of discounts does your school give compared to schools across the state?
- How much debt do students at your school graduate with on average compared to the state average?
- If your school has two different state education systems (for example, California has both the University of California and the California State University systems), how do they compare?
- Which school system is better for low-income students?

In *Debt by Degrees*, we've organized the schools by state to help you make these comparisons. Simply search by state and sort the colleges by type to find all the public state schools.

How to report on this:

- **Look at which schools have the highest number of low-income students.** Find the schools that accept the most Pell grant recipients, and those that accept the least. What does each group of schools have in common? Do urban schools have a different student body mix than rural schools?
- **How does your school's tuition compare to other state schools?** Which state college is the most expensive? Once you have identified the schools, find out why there is a cost difference between the two schools. Call the press officers for the schools and ask them why their tuition is higher or lower than their peers'.
- **Find out which schools' graduates are struggling to pay off their loans.** The non-repayment rate represents the percentage of student loan borrowers who are struggling to pay off their loans and haven't been able to pay even \$1 off their original loan amounts. For example, in New York, 33.3 percent of student borrowers from the College of Staten Island CUNY are having trouble repaying their loans, compared with 9.3 percent of former students from SUNY College of Geneseo.

3. The Plight of College Dropouts: Debt, But No Degree

More than 40 percent of students at four-year colleges

drop out before graduation. For students with loans, they are left with a pile of debt and no degree to show for it. Students who drop out of school also have more trouble finding work, earn less on average and are more likely to default on their loans.

The new government data reveals for the first time how much debt college dropouts take on. For example, Cornell graduates 93.3 percent of their students, but the students who don't graduate within six years end up with \$9,496 of debt on average. At Central Texas College, a two-year community college, the figure is \$4,750.

How to report on this:

- **How much debt do dropouts take on at your school?** In *Debt by Degrees*, you can look up the average debt held by dropouts from your school. Even small amounts of debt can become a large burden for dropouts, who have no degree and are the most at risk for default.
- **Find students who dropped out of your university and interview them about why they didn't graduate. Does your school help struggling students?** The most common reason students drop out is they are unable to balance work and school. Find out if your school has programs to help working students. How does your school assist students who need to take a break before finishing their education? What strategies does your school have to increase their overall graduation rate and also the rate of low-income students?

4. Graduates Can't Pay Off Their Loans

Until the most recent data release, the only available data on how well students do at repaying their loans was the "cohort default rate," or what percentage of students fail to pay back their loans. The Department of Education uses this rate to regulate schools: If a college's default rate is above 30 percent for the three most recent years, the school may lose its eligibility for federal aid.

The latest data release, however, allowed ProPublica to publish the "non-repayment rate," or what percent of students can't even pay back \$1 of their original loan principal. We have data on all students, and you can look at repayment rates for just low-income students as well. Non-repayment rates are a more reliable indicator of trouble than default rates, which are susceptible to manipulation.

How to report on this:

- **How well are students able to repay their loans at your school?** What percentage of students default on their loans within three years? Compare this with the percentage of students who are struggling to repay their loans.
- **Interview former students about their loan repayment experience.** Did the school offer them any guidance on how to repay their loans? What are their monthly payments? Who is their loan servicer? How long do they expect it will take them to repay their loans?
- **Ask school administrators about the school's non-repayment rate.** What are they doing to help students pay back their loans? How is your school financially preparing students for after graduation?

5. Some Alumni Don't Earn More Than High School Graduates

The government has also released data on how much alumni are earning at each school, but it's not broken down by school program, so this data can be difficult to analyze. It's not fair to compare the earnings of a tech school to a liberal arts school, for example, as their distribution of majors will differ substantially.

However, one of the figures on earnings remains valuable: "threshold earnings," or the percentage of students earning less than \$25,000 a decade after entering school. This rate indicates how many students are earning the same amount or less than what they would have expected to earn with only a high school degree.

How to report on this:

- **For most schools, the percentage of students earning less than \$25,000 a year will be quite low.** However, if you are at a school where this number is very high (greater than 50 percent), this is something to focus on. How is your school ensuring that their educational program will improve students' future opportunities?
- **Perhaps your school's graduates seem to do fine, but what about the schools in your community or your city?** Look into whether there are educational programs near you that are potentially exploiting their students. Interview students about their expectations for post-graduate earnings. Find out if the school advertised high earnings that contradict the data. Approach the school and ask why so many graduates are earning so little money.

Some Extra Tips:

- **Remember, the data is just the starting point.** Talk to students, teachers, administrators and experts about what you're seeing in the numbers and get as much context as possible for your readers.
- **When comparing your school to other schools, make sure you're making apples-to-apples comparisons.** If your school is a two-year public community college, don't compare your school to a four-year private research university. In *Debt by Degrees*, we always separate these schools so you are only comparing schools in the same category.
- **For the poorest of students, even a small amount of debt can be a large burden.** Even small debts can severely limit the post-graduation opportunities of students, particularly those without a financial safety net. Think about debt numbers as a percentage of a low family income, such as \$25,000. Leaving school with \$25,000 in loans is 100 percent of how much that student's entire family earns over an entire year.
- **The government data on student debt and earnings only accounts for students receiving federal aid.** If students do not receive federal grants or loans, they are not included in these figures.
- **Similarly, the newly released government data only tells the story of federal loans.** For some students, federal student aid (which includes student loans, parent loans, grants, and work study programs) is not enough to pay for the full cost of going to college. Some rely on outside sources to help pay the bills, such as turning to parents to take out loans, or taking on private bank loans themselves. But these figures are quite low: about 4.5 percent of parents take on federal loans and only 6 percent of students take out private loans.