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The moral challenge of affordable tuition

by [Richard Eckstrom](#) Contributing Columnist

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When I saw the following headline recently I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me: "Converse College cutting tuition by 43 percent."

Yes, the small, private college in Spartanburg plans to slash its tuition sticker price nearly in half, from more than \$29,000 down to \$16,500 starting next year.

Describing it as a "tuition reset," Converse said the college "will continue to award institutional scholarships and need-based financial aid, lowering the cost for some students even further from the published price."

The move made national news, as well it should have. It's a much-welcomed departure from many years of headlines about colleges, both public and private, raising their tuition at what I consider to be, frankly, unacceptable levels.

Recent increases in student fees and tuition border on being a moral matter.

I'm no conspiracy theorist, but recently a headline in the Wall Street Journal also caught my attention – "Dear Class of '13: You've been scammed."

Strong words, to be sure, but as I read the article its premise began to make more and more sense to me:

The main reason for the high cost of college isn't the interest rates on student loans or "predatory" for-profit schools or even a growing demand for college-educated workers.

The main reason for the high cost of college – very simply – is the high cost of college.

You've heard about the military-industrial complex? Well, the Wall Street Journal story describes the skyrocketing tuition rates of recent years as nothing less than a conspiracy at the hands of the "college-industrial complex."

Citing data from the College Board, an association of more than 5,900 colleges and other educational entities, the article says annual tuition at the typical public university in 1983 was \$2,200 – in today's dollars. "You could get a full four-year degree for \$8,800."

Currently that's less than the cost of one year's tuition at all of our state-funded four-year colleges in South Carolina, as it is at colleges across the nation.

The article's explanation for this rings familiar in the Palmetto State:

It's not just the conservative Wall Street Journal sounding such notes, either. Rolling Stone magazine published a story several weeks ago headlined "Ripping Off Young America: The College-Loan Scandal." It too attributed the problem to "appallingly high" tuition costs.

True, state funding for higher education in South Carolina, like elsewhere across the county, has been reduced significantly. In fact, public funding for higher ed ranks low for the Palmetto State compared to other states in the Southeast.

But, I'm sorry, that's no excuse for the kinds of tuition increases we've been seeing. The fact is colleges could cut their costs and lower tuition if they chose to do so.

It's no coincidence, by the way, that the tuition escalation in South Carolina started right around the same time our state lottery began operating.

In fact, the scenario here in South Carolina is that lottery scholarships to students probably were used to offset state funding reductions for higher education, in apparent conflict with the lottery's enabling legislation.

In any case, more colleges in South Carolina need to follow Converse's lead in resetting tuitions:

Education is an important part of the fabric of our society. It's indispensable to our democratic system of self-government and our economic well-being. And if we continue to price more and more of our young people out of the higher education marketplace as we have been, we will forsake not only their future – but ours, too.

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