



Even after numerous offers of large scholarships, financial aid is often needed to fill a tuition gap. ENQUIRER FILE

The bubble, up close and personal

My family experiences college funding system



CLIFF PEALE
@cliffpeale

I write about higher education and the University of Cincinnati Health system and all their impacts in our region. Email me cpeale@enquirer.com.

My daughter was still getting over the thrill of getting accepted to some of the private colleges on her list when the scholarship award letters started arriving.

In recognition of your outstanding achievements, they said, we have awarded you our Presidential/Trustee/Distinguished scholarship.

Here's \$4,500, one school said. Another offered \$10,000. One offered even more than that, and all offered the chance to compete for more money.

Congratulations on joining our family, they all wrote. We know you will flourish here and make us proud. You might want to go online and reserve your dorm space now. For a small fee.

We're still six weeks away from National Decision Day, and, like thousands of other families around the region, we still aren't sure where she will end up for her freshman year of college in August.

The scholarships sound like a lot, but they only make a dent in the astronomical sticker prices of \$40,000 per year and more.

We'll still have scrimp to pay the bills. The state university option, reasonable by comparison, fell by the

wayside early. Probably because I said I liked it.

As my wife and I read the private college award letters, we each took 10 seconds doing the same internal calculation in our heads. Yeah, we said as we looked up at each other. That could work.

Regardless of where she goes, someone targeted my daughter and was sending her scholarship offers of thousands of dollars to choose their college. We hadn't even done the financial aid forms yet, so they had no idea whether we need the money or not.

Don't get me wrong. We're not sending it back. Like a ton of parents, we've put away money for a long time that we could have spent. And like a ton of students, she's worked hard through high school and deserves the rewards.

That doesn't make us special. It makes us normal.

But it makes me wonder about the system. There are millions of students out there who really need the money. I hope that everyone accepted at all of these schools is getting the same kind of offers.

What about the less-fortunate senior who scored a couple of points lower on the ACT? What about the child of a single mother who worked 30 hours a week through high school? What about the child of a CEO who could afford to pay for Harvard 10 times?

And the topper: If colleges can afford all of this financial aid, why does room and board cost \$45,000 a year?

The fact is that private universities discount their tuition by these huge amounts so they're competitive in drawing middle-class students. The sticker price is a price they never expect to collect.

Those kinds of games, with huge consequences for families like mine, are the reason why many think higher education is in for a hard fall.

The sticker prices are preposterous. But they're supported by all of this aid, both private scholarships like my daughter is going to need, and federal Pell grants for low-income families.

Tuition goes up. Then financial aid goes up. And campuses keep growing – all in this spiral that has to end sometime.

Some experts call it the "tuition bubble," a subject we're exploring at The Enquirer and Cincinnati.com this year.

If the tuition bubble pops, maybe all of these scholarships will evaporate. Maybe families will refuse to pay massive tuition at private colleges and will flock to less expensive public universities.

Maybe taxpayers, who cleaned up the mess after the housing bubble popped a couple of years ago, will have to prop up both students and universities.

None of it seems to make sense. But now that we've filled out the FAFSA and the CSS Profile – that was a tough day – got our spreadsheet going and can really compare the offers, one trend emerges.

The tuition charges vary widely, as do the scholarship offers. But the gap between those two numbers, the amount we'll be responsible to pay, is remarkably similar.

It won't be easy, and our daughter will be paying some of her own way with her own money or student loans.

That makes me think it's more science than art.

Maybe, after all, it's a system that works in spite of itself.

Let's hope so. ■