

[The Arizona Republic](#)

A college degree pays off. We all know that's true for individuals - giving, for instance, a 94 percent boost in income to a male worker ages 35 to 44, compared with a high school graduate.

What's sometimes overlooked is the huge payoff to our economy as a whole. Arizona State University calculates that its undergraduate educational services over the past three decades have raised total income in the state by \$1 billion.

But while higher education is more and more important, it's less and less affordable.

Tuition has been rising faster than inflation, driven by factors that reduced state support for public schools and growing needs for technology. Financial aid hasn't kept pace.

Two-thirds of all four-year college graduates in 2004 left school with student debt, compared with less than one-third in 1993, according to the federation of state Public Interest Research Groups.

The issue is urgent enough to bring Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi to Arizona today on her first domestic trip since becoming speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. She's speaking at Arizona State University in Tempe, home turf of Rep. Harry Mitchell. He and fellow Democratic Reps. Raúl Grijalva and Ed Pastor will join her to discuss initiatives to keep higher education within financial reach.

Congress has already voted to increase Pell Grants, the federal need-based program. The maximum amount, which hadn't been changed in four years, was raised to \$4,310, from \$4,050.

Both Democrats and President Bush are proposing large increases beyond that. But Democrats complain that the administration is offsetting the larger Pell grants by cutting other types of aid.

On one side of the ledger, every \$100 increase to the Pell grant costs the federal government almost \$400 million, according to PIRG.

On the other side, the public has a big stake in making resources available so students don't have to take on so much debt. If the burden gets too heavy, promising students will be priced out of college, and graduates will be priced out of some jobs.

PIRG calculates that in Arizona, 29 percent of graduates from public universities have too much of a debt load to be able to afford to take an entry-level teaching job.

Other strategies to make college affordable include cutting interest rates on some federal loans,

as the House voted to do, and shifting out of a private-sector federal program that has higher costs than the government direct-loan program.

At the state level, the Legislature should provide adequate support for the university's growing enrollment. The universities need to follow through on their pledge to match substantial tuition hikes with substantial increases in student aid.

The bottom line affects us all. Not least because the companies Arizona hopes to attract and nurture, those with the brightest prospects for the 21st century, are looking for a large pool of highly educated workers.