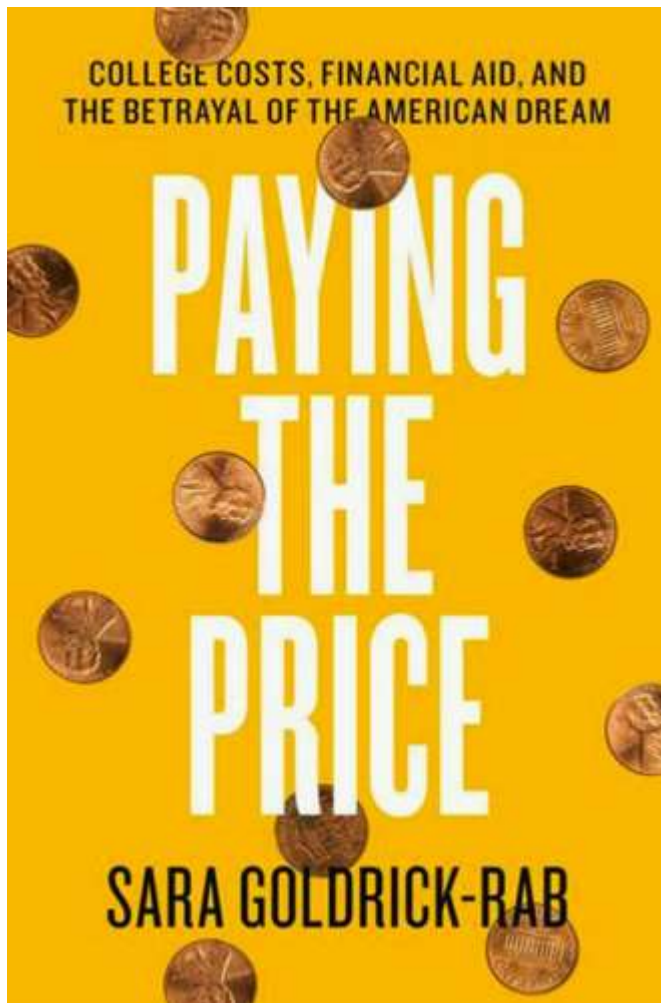


Add 'Paying the Price' to your reading list

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"Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid and the Betrayal of the American Dream" by Sara Goldrick-Rab. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, 368 pages, \$27.50.



“Over the past 50 years, America built a financial aid system with lofty ambitions and few teeth,” Sara Goldrick-Rab explains in the inaugural chapter of “Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid and the Betrayal of the American Dream,” her recent treatise on a topic that seems to pique the interest of anyone interested in attending college these days. “That was fine, perhaps, at a time when a college degree was nice but not required. When the Pell program began, Pell Grants subsidized more than 80 percent of the cost of attending the average public university and all of the costs of attending a community college.”

“Things are different now,” she continues. “Today the maximum Pell covers less than one-third of the cost of attending a public four-year college or university and barely 60 percent of the cost of attending a community college. Spending on the Pell program has lagged behind growth in the number of recipients for decades. These trends, along with rising college costs, have resulted in the significant erosion of the Pell purchasing power.”

I ran across this exquisite resource on the fiscal challenges facing higher education as I was researching textbooks for an upcoming graduate course. I had also seen an interview with Goldrick-Rab on C-SPAN’s “Book TV” back in October and was intrigued by her ability to clarify the convoluted college financial aid process. I requested a copy for review. When the book arrived in my office mailbox a couple of days later, I was not disappointed. In fact, I finished the entire manuscript in the course of a long weekend. The prose is mesmerizing, convincing and more than a little frightening.

“Paying the Price” is one of the most extensively researched volumes I have read in recent memory, with 32 pages of source notes and 44 pages of references at the conclusion of the introduction and 10 chapters comprising the main text. The author does an exceptional job of laying out the various reasons we arrived at the present moment, including a fairly in-depth analysis of the underlying historical context and evolving political climate that has characterized higher education since the end of World War II. More relevant to the average American family, however, is Goldrick-Rab’s explanation of the growing gap between what it costs to attend college and what appears to be a shrinking return on investment. College is increasingly seen as the only viable avenue for achieving

and sustaining a decent standard of living, but does this perception actually mirror reality for a growing segment of the population?

Much of the narrative is punctuated with case studies and vignettes that illustrate how seemingly-abstract economic and political policies often play out in real-life scenarios. One chapter that really stood out was “Family Matters,” which delves into the sacrifices many families make to put their sons and daughters through college. See if you can relate to the story of Norbert Webster, a relatively poor student from the Midwest:

“When Norbert got ready for his first year of higher education, he had a brother in college, a younger sibling still in high school and divorced parents, both of whom had inconsistent jobs. The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) that Norbert submitted that year shows a student who could rely on very little financial help from his family. But these records, while illuminating, miss some of the most important parts of Norbert’s life, and some of the critical, nonfinancial aspects of family support.”

Goldrick-Rab then goes into an explanation of the dynamics within Norbert’s family and the mutual sense of obligation they feel toward each other, especially when facing difficult economic times. I was amazed and inspired by what they did to support each other. It was only after reflecting on why the story was included that I came to understand and appreciate the larger and more profound point being made. “As Norbert’s story illustrates, even when there is little money to be had, low- and moderate-income families support their children in other ways not always recognized by the system. In response, students often spend time and even contribute money to help their families. The financial aid system – and college more generally – fails to recognize the complexity and interdependence of families.”

Goldrick-Rab is a professor of higher education policy and sociology at Temple University. The founder of the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, which works to make college more affordable, her articles have appeared in the New York Times, the Chronicle of Higher Education and Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. Her previous books include “Reinventing Financial Aid: Charting a New Course to College Affordability,” which she co-edited with Andrew P. Kelly for Harvard University Press, and “Putting Poor People to Work: How the Work-First Idea Eroded College Access for the Poor,” which she co-wrote with Kathleen M. Shaw, Christopher Mazzeo and Jerry A. Jacobs.

Ultimately, Goldrick-Rab is optimistic we can successfully navigate the turbulent waters that lie ahead with respect to the complicated relationship we have with higher education in this country. Toward this end, she offers concrete recommendations backed up with concrete data – which is what makes “Paying the Price” stand out from similar efforts that grapple with the same subject matter. Her suggestions for overhauling the Pell Grant program, for instance, are particularly imaginative and entirely reasonable, as are her proposed remedies for much of the malaise currently associated with the process of determining how much financial assistance a family actually needs. She just needs to find a way to get her ideas in front of those who can truly make a difference: our legislators.

“With economic inequality on the rise, and low-income and middle-class Americans under pressure,” she concludes, “this generation must meet the challenge of making one of the best ways out of poverty and into the middle class – a college education – affordable for all.”

I could not agree more. This is probably one you should add to your reading list.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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