

Transcription for



INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

EP 66: ENROLLMENT DECLINES, NO FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: HIGHER ED'S ROUGH WEEK

TAMARA HILER

ROBERT KELCHEN

TERESA VALERIO PARROT

NOVEMBER 2021

PROVIDED BY

CAPTION ACCESS

[contact@captionaccess](mailto:contact@captionaccess)

[www.captionaccess.com](http://www.captionaccess.com)

EP 66: ENROLLMENT DECLINES, NO FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: HIGHER ED'S ROUGH WEEK

TAMARA HILER

ROBERT KELCHEN

TERESA VALERIO PARROT

34:55

====

[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: Are politicians and the public losing faith in higher education? Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside higher Ed and host of The Key. Thanks for being here.

The last week has been an eventful one in higher education. New data from the National Student Clearinghouse showed that college enrollments tumbled again this fall, with hundreds of thousand fewer students opting to start or continue their education educations than even during the heart of the pandemic last fall. Many people in and around higher education had expected, or at least hoped, that enrollment would rebound this fall. And when Democrats in Congress unveiled a new skinnier version of President Biden's Build Back Better Act, it contained about \$40 billion in new funds for colleges and their students, a huge sum, but far less than the president initially proposed. And gone from the legislation were key initiatives such as the much touted tuition-free community college. Were enrollments lower because of continued worries about the pandemic, because of the improved job market, or because more individuals are questions whether pursuing a degree is worth their money and time? Should colleges and students be grateful that the federal legislation would still invest many billions or worried that higher-ed related programs were disproportionately cut from the bill?

In today's episode I'm joined by three thoughtful observers of the higher ed landscape to talk about what these developments mean and why they matter. Tamara Hiler is director of education at Third Way, a center-left think tank in Washington. Robert Kelchen is professor and chair of education at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and a keen analyst of higher ed policy and finance. Teresa Valerio

Parrot is a principal at TVP Communications and an expert on higher ed communications who coedits Inside Higher Ed's Call to Action blog.

Before we begin today's conversation, here's a word from the sponsor of this week's episode, Formstack.

VOICE: It's time to ditch paper processes. Too many of us are still drowning in paper, fixing printers, and chasing signatures. Formstack helps your teams automate manual processes, streamline student registration, and simplify enrollment, all without code. Learn why 27,000 organizations have turned to Formstack to help them reimagine their world of work. Go to [formstack.com/ihe](https://formstack.com/ihe).

DOUG LEDERMAN: Now on to our conversation with Tamara Hiler, Robert Kelchen, and Teresa Parrot. Teresa, Tamara, and Robert, thanks for being here.

VOICES: Thanks for having us Thanks for having us.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Robert, you study economic and other trends in higher education pretty closely. What did you make of the reported continuing decline in undergraduate enrollments and what does it tell us about the current moment we're in?

ROBERT KELCHEN: It's not a good sign for higher education. Enrollment's down again and it's continuing a slide that's happened really over most of last decade. But I think people thought once the pandemic got a little more under control, enrollment would start to rise. But some things have changed. The economy has been strong, especially for low- and mid-wage jobs, so students are looking at other opportunities. Childcare is a real issue, family care is a real issue. And then some students also aren't very happy with the mode of instruction. They want fully in person, they get online. Or they want online and their college went back in person. So it's a whole range of factors driving that decline, while we still have an increase at the graduate level.

DOUG LEDERMAN: The pandemic scrambled things. We normally see higher education be counter-cyclical such that enrollments climb when the economy is bad. They tend to decline when the economy is good. Teresa, what's your sense of how the pandemic has scrambled the picture? Is this mostly the economy influencing enrollments or are there other factors at play?

TERESA PARROT: As Robert was talking about, there is this uncertainty about what exactly was going to happen this fall. And we saw even as schools were finishing in the spring, there was quite a bit of displeasure, whether it was full pricing for online classes or it was the Delta variant midsummer, when we could have had an uptick in enrollment at a number of institutions that were down. I think that there were students that were worried that we would go back to fully remote. And we've even seen leading up to Census date, a number of students who had high anxiety that they were going to be the case that was going to make their institution go remote only. There's a whole bunch of anxiety for this generation of what the experience looks and feels like, how they contribute to that, and what the responsible thing is to do as they're pursuing their education.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Do you think that institutions in their planning could have done anything to sort of ease that concern or is it almost inevitable given the uncertainty in the health situation?

TERESA PARROT: If we think about the timeline that leads up to an enrollment season, right now we're getting ready for Fall 2022. So if you think about where we were exactly a year ago now, we had no idea what this fall was going to bring. So as we were communicating and as we were marketing, as we were talking about what the college experience would look like, we were a little bit of a hot mess talking about what this was going to be across all types of institutions. And I think there were a number of students who thought if this is what college is right now, I'm just going to pause a little bit more, or I am going to take that job that looks really, really good.

And the other element that I would add into this is that I think that this really brought up that urban-rural-suburban divide that we continue that we continue to see. One of my very close colleagues is an instructor on a campus in a rural area, and she said they definitely saw the decline in males this fall because those males could go and work in the oil and gas industry and make a lot more money than they were seeing would be the starting salaries one they get their degrees. So I think there are some ways in which we need to be thinking differently about what we talk about outcomes and how we talk about earning potential, how we talk about life-long benefit of an education, all of those ways that drew us into higher education. It's not resonating right now.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Tamara, Third Way is among that groups that does a good bit of public polling around higher education. Jumping off of what Teresa just said, how much do you think the questioning of the value of a degree is affecting enrollment, alongside the economic and health and other factors Robert and Teresa just discussed?

TAMARA HILER: Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, there's a couple of things from the research that we've seen that's sort of bearing out now. I think that first is that, yes, there has definitely been an uptick in especially prospective high school seniors questioning the value of higher education at this point. I think, you know, in some sense because the thought of getting a job is a lot further in the distance that current college students who see the job market and know that, you know, what's coming for them directly around the corner. However, that being said, we so consistently see in our polling research that, you know, around two-thirds of likely voters, Americans from, you know, different backgrounds, as well as current students, still see the value in higher education and understand that there is a return on investment. They see that there's bigger earnings potential, there's the prospect of getting a better job with a college degree. We've sort of seen that continue to play out.

In fact, we just conducted a recent round of research about the reconciliation priorities. And higher education was at the top in terms of the kinds of investments they want to see Congress put in. So even if as high as things like early childhood education, which we know is extremely popular, Medicare and Medicaid expansion, making sure that we're seeing more investment in higher ed was at the top, which to me signals that people still value and see that higher education matters.

The other thing I just want to speak to is that when we were doing a lot of research last year around students throughout the pandemic, it was very interesting that we continued to see that students actually gained more trust in their institutions over the last year than less trust in a lot of ways because I think didn't blame their schools for the pandemic and felt like, as long as they were getting clear communication early on, that they understood whatever decisions their schools were making. And so I think that, you know, that's probably something that institutions have learned as well is just saying like, let's be clear up front about what we know or what we don't know, what vaccine mandates are going to look like or not look like, and put that out on the table and let students make decisions in real time is something that I think is helpful into these broader questions.

DOUG LEDERMAN: If opinions about the value of a degree are a factor at all, it's with individuals making decisions that are pretty practical. I'm going to take this job in the oil and gas industry that's now available that might not have been, rather than a more philosophical, I don't think it's valuable. I'm just going to make the immediate term decision that this is better for me right now.

TAMARA HILER: Yes, absolutely. And I think that we can't be talking about the pandemic in past tense, right? Like I think we're still downplaying the reality that the pandemic exists and the decisions people are making on an individual level is still very much rooted in the decisions around how safe they feel in

public, whether or not they're vaccinated, whether or not they want to be vaccinated because a lot of institutions are mandating that, to Robert's point, whether or not they want to be taking classes online. And also just thinking about the cycle of how enrollment happens. The fact it closes, you know, at the end of June for the fall. So if we're looking at current enrollment numbers, you know, you probably had some people who were undecided in the spring, decided, not going to apply for FAFSA. Maybe they change their mind come fall, but then here they are without the ability to have financial aid, and so therefore are going to have to forego an entire year. So I do think we'll see these individual decisions play out in the next few years in my opinion are going to be even more telling than what we're seeing right now.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Teresa, do you want to jump back in?

TERESA PARROT: I did, just to make one point. And I think it's critically important as we talk about the increased transparency in communications. I think it's important for institutions to pay attention to those data points around trust. Those institutions that chose to really shift from an external focused communication platform to instead prioritizing internal communications, which is what builds the trust, has really been important and necessary to have your audiences feel as if you've got this and you've got them. And I think that's exactly the basis of that trust. So for those institutions that are still getting internal critique about how much or how little they're sharing, this is an inflection point about to Tamara's point, continuing those COVID communications because we're still in COVID and doubling down on internal communications and the necessity of them.

DOUG LEDERMAN: When we look at the enrollment figures, we continue to see certain groups disproportionately affected, and to the dismay of a lot of people, those most affected are the students who are historically underrepresented in higher education, Black and brown students, adult learners, low-income students, and the institutions that serve them, especially community colleges. Robert, how concerned should we be about where the continuing declines are happening?

ROBERT KELCHEN: I'm certainly concerned about that. And going into Fall 2020, I think the thought was that enrollment would be down, particularly among students of color and of women, with women being of particular concern, because of childcare issues. It turns out the student of color piece has largely held, but the enrollment drop has been much larger among men than women. And I think part of that is the need to go out in the labor market, and also better opportunities, quite frankly. And this has really hit community colleges the hardest because those are places where students are really deciding whether to go or not go to college, while in the four-year sector, the decision often is where to go instead of whether or not to go. So I'm definitely concerned about this. And I'll also make the point that these

enrollment declines have implications for years to come because of the ways that both states fund public higher education often based on enrollment, and the way that private colleges get money, which is based on student tuition dollars. And this means that the budgets for colleges and universities are going to be tight for years to come.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I've heard a lot of conversation about Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the last year or so where people are prioritizing feeding their families and being safe, etc., over at times going to college. At this moment at least, it's potentially people again making a slightly more affirmative decision that this job in this improved labor market is the better choice for me right now. But I'm curious from either Tamara or Teresa, you know, what are your thoughts on disproportionate impact and the sort of gaps in enrollment that we're seeing, particularly among underrepresented students, and how to do you think it tees up and sets up the next few years for institutions? May Tamara, do you initial thoughts on that?

TAMARA HILER: To Robert's point, it's something that we absolutely need to be aware of and keep an eye on because we don't want to further exacerbate the equity gap that we know already exists, especially when it comes to sort of the long-term wealth gap that exists for people of color based on, that get compounded based on level of education. And knowing the data that they're about that if you have a postsecondary credential or degree, you're going to earn more over the course of your lifetime, and sort of being aware that some of these short-term financial gains or decisions that people are making may actually lead to sort of long-term financial loss because at some point the economy and job market will rebalance out and we're going to continue to need high-skilled workers who sort of have those sort of postsecondary credentials.

TERESA PARROT: I'm actually going to wrap a bow around both of our conversations that we've had thus far. I think it's interesting that we are down in the exact demographics that our most vulnerable institutions from an enrollment standpoint have decided are their key markets they're going to go after. And those are males and those are community college transfers, and those are underrepresented students. So as we talk about some of these institutions that financially are on the brink or are vulnerable for what the market may bring for them, those areas that they've identified, whether it was at a conference or through a dataset, or however they got there, that this is their golden goose. Now we have a bigger problem. So how are those institutions thinking now, this is where we are going to go, and their enrollment might be down this year, where are they going to look next year to go and how is that going to help them shore up their budgets and their enrollment?

TAMARA HILER: And one other thing that I do think is noteworthy in the data, and others may have

thoughts about this too, is that we're not seeing at for-profit institutions the kind of boom that I think everyone had anticipated or sort of braced for following what we saw happen in 2008, especially given that we know that they have these kind of marketing budgets and things to try to recruit especially vulnerable populations in this kind of situation. So I just think that that indicates that efforts over the last decade or so to sort of protect consumers against some of these really bad actors, and not all for-profits are bad actors, but obviously we saw a lot of fallout and are continuing to see fallout from the enrollment boom in for-profits after 2008. I think that those have worked, and that's been helpful, and hopefully that will mean that as students continue or start to make decisions about reenrolling or enrolling, that they will be more cognizant about where they choose to attend so that we don't see some of those really terrible outcomes like we saw after the last recession.

ROBERT KELCHEN: I think the for-profit lack of growth this time around, there's just a lot more competition in that student space than there was back during the Great Recession. And some of the most aggressive for-profits aren't as aggressive or even around right now. So I think things have changed in that space.

TERESA PARROT: And I think also we've learned and paid attention to the feedback that we've received. We were hearing that higher education, the nonprofit side, wasn't as responsive to students and wasn't as accessible. and I think both the rise of the for-profits helped us to better understand that and the pandemic definitely drove that point home.

VOICE: It's time to ditch paper processes. Too many of us are still drowning in paper, fixing printers, and chasing signatures. Formstack helps your teams automate manual processes, streamline student registration, and simplify enrollment, all without code. Learn why 27,000 organizations have turned to Formstack to help them reimagine their world of work. Go to [formstack.com/ihe](https://formstack.com/ihe).

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're speaking today with Robert Kelchen of the University of Tennessee, Teresa Valerio Parrot of TVP Communications, and Tamara Hiler of Third Way.

I want to shift our discussion from declining enrollments to the other major news development in the last week, the shrinking of the Democratic Party's Build Back Better legislation. Tamara, you mentioned earlier that your polling had found the public to be very supportive of significant investments in the higher ed-related elements of the massive budget reconciliation bill. It's not clear that the members of Congress feel that way, though, and at least based on what stayed in and what got cut from the bill as the Democrats tried to whittle it down to a level acceptable to some of its more conservative



lawmakers. Recognizing that things are still in flux, how do you think we should be looking at this legislation for colleges? There were lots of promises made, only some of which this legislation would appear to fulfill. I'm curious what you think about postsecondary education's status as represented by this legislation?

TERESA PARROT: I know that there is some disappointment in the dollar amounts that have gone to higher education, and knowing that tuition-free community college didn't make it in to this package. But I still think a \$40 billion investment in higher education is something to be celebrated here, and in particular, you know, thinking about carrying a big boost to health, coupled with sort of this first of its kind college-completion fund to us signals a really big win for students and community colleges.

And this bill isn't the end-all-be-all of investment that's ever going to happen in higher education. I think it's a really critical and important first step. For example, the college completion fund. Yes, it's \$500 million over five years to really scale up essentially the kind of teeny ASAP-type programs that are focused on retention and completion that will, you know, benefit community colleges sort of a disproportionate amount, given the way that the formula's going to be allocated. I think that signals a really important federal shift in higher education investment, because it's kind of the first time on a scale of this nature where we're not just seeing investments in sort of assets and affordability, which are critical, and we are getting that with the Pell boost. But now we're also seeing it on the other end and saying that completion matters, retention matters, and, hopefully, as more evidence continues to build and showing that these types of strategies and investments work that we'll see that scaled up over time.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Robert, are you as upbeat about how this legislation has shaken out so far? And I can't stress enough what a work in progress this still is.

ROBERT KELCHEN: It's not surprising that it got pared down. That's just what legislative sausage making at its finest. There are two big shifts in this legislation, that completion fund, if it is actually used to encourage or incentivize colleges to help students complete, that's an enormous shift in federal policy. The Obama Administration tried it multiple times, got nowhere. I still think there's a decent chance that this gets watered down later, because it does create winners and losers. States do this all the time in their funding models. And about 40 states at some point have state funding to completion, but not at the federal level.

And the second thing that's worth noting here is the Pell boost, part of it only goes to students at public and private nonprofit colleges, at least as of right now. That's the first time that the feds have made a

distinction by sector and funding. That could have enormous implications, because I could see something now where it's not just for-profit colleges get cut out, but even some private nonprofits, especially those that are well resourced and serve few Pell students. And so there's some big changes here if this all ends up going through.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So you think the Ivies are next, is that what you're saying?

ROBERT KELCHEN: I could see that coming from both the left and the right.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Teresa, what do you make of the legislation at this moment?

TERESA PARROT: I'd like to kind of discuss how higher education approach this. I think that there was a point where it looked as if there was going to be more money sent to the community colleges, and the four-years weren't very supportive of it. And I thought that that was a very interesting take. Some of the comments that we saw from across higher education were really focused on, what about me? And I thought that that was in interesting moment that we had, that it wasn't the support of the industry writ large--it was, and now where's my part? And I do wonder if that had any kind of a lasting impression on the legislators, the members of Congress, that it's all or nothing on doubling Pell and some of the other initiatives, and the support among different types of institutions was paper thin. If wonder what it would have looked like instead if all of higher education would have said, yes, let's absolutely get whatever we can at the most we can. And community colleges are a pipeline and this is important for us as a sector, and let's think about what this could mean.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We've got a pretty rich tradition of seeing proposals to create new policy approaches getting junked in favor of just expanding Pell grants, which is the bedrock program that helps students at all institutions, and doesn't have a lot of accountability rules embedded into it. Tamara, going back to you, I agree that the completion fund was the kind of break with historical policy that we don't see very often. The federal-state partnerships that was linked to tuition-free community college was also viewed as that kind of transformative change. Do you think it was just too much for people right now, and do you think there's still a possibility of something happens in the next couple of years that establishes that link?

TAMARA HILER: I mean, I don't have a crystal ball so I can't say for sure if that will happen. But it is a zero sum game. And we know that in order to pay for certain priorities, that would mean less for others,

especially as the negotiations were going on and it became more clear that this \$3.5 trillion that we've been talking about was getting dwindled down to \$1.5 trillion. And I want to say like I do think that's like an expectation thing, right, like we should not be disappointed in \$1.5 trillion or for higher education, \$40 billion investment, I do think that because these bigger numbers were thrown out earlier that clouds sort that opportunity here. Tuition-free community college, even on some level federal-state partnerships, you know, it's not just that you're pitting certain kinds of colleges against others, which is always going to be a factor, but we also know that some of these programs aren't necessarily politically popular. I do think that's why we go back to Pell.

I do think expanding Pell also has sort of longer legs in the sense that it's very rare--Robert probably has more historical knowledge here. Once the Pell grant is expanded, it's almost are that it would ever go back down. And we know that that's mandatory spending that's going to continue forever versus some of these programs could end up on the chopping block or get sunsetted out in a couple of years anyways, whereas Pell as the ability, you can tweak formulas and make it more expansive to larger populations over time.

So I think that at this point, we should just be celebrating these victories. We know that there's even the potential for another \$400 boost to the maximum Pell that could come through the appropriations process that's moving forward as well, and we should be focused on that. And knowing like what I said, this isn't the one and only time we're ever going to be having these conversations or opportunities to expand funding in higher education.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You're right that this may not be the last big investment in public policy on higher education, but the world could change pretty dramatically a year from now after the congressional midterm elections. And it does seem as if higher education was disproportionately affected with the cutbacks from the original Build Back Better legislation, which if I'm remembering right had in the neighborhood of a \$120 billion or more for postsecondary and student programs. It's now at about a third of that, while the entire package was cut roughly in half. There's certainly history going back to the Clinton and Obama administrations of community colleges being promised the moon, and then getting much less delivered. And a lot of community college advocates hoped this time might be different given who is in the White House. Robert, how do you look at that?

ROBERT KELCHEN: Community colleges have been promised a lot in the last several Democratic administrations. And it comes down to the two realities. One is when funding gets tight across the board, higher ed has a hard time competing with other priorities. If you put higher ed up against early childhood, early childhood is going to win at least nine times out of ten. And that seems to be what's

happening here. And second, if something is earmarked for community colleges, other sectors start to get concerned, and they want their piece as well. And some of it is a matter of survival and some of it is concerns, especially from some in the four-year sector that community colleges don't have as good of outcomes, even while they're relying on those community college transfer students to help pay their bills. So I'm not surprised that something focused on community colleges went more broadly on higher education. And it also helps duck some tricky issues. Initially, it was community colleges plus minority-serving institutions. But then other lower resourced institutions want their part as well. Meanwhile, you have other parts of the higher ed lobby going behind the scenes to make sure they get their part of it as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Tamara...

TAMARA HILER: I mean, I just want to say too that, you know, even though we didn't see tuition-free community college in this particular legislation, I do know community colleges also are going to benefit from the big boost to sort of the workforce programs that are going to be coming through the Labor Department and there are other programs in which community colleges will sort of benefit there. Agreed, we want to continue to push for additional NC investment, but I also think that once again community colleges are going to fare very well, given the investments that were put forward in this bill, including the way that the formula allocation's going to work out in the completion fund, and as I mentioned, some of the boost to sort of workforce development training and apprenticeship programs that we're also seeing in this bill.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I just been doing this long enough that I have seen, as Robert said, back to the Clinton Administration and the Obama Administration, one of my favorite analogies is Lucy holding the football for Charlie Brown as he goes to kick it and her pulling it back. I'm a community college leader, the public policy domain starts to feel a little bit like that to me. Like every time they're promised a massive change and a massive increase in support, they end up not getting anywhere near it. This isn't the administration doing this, although obviously there was a decision at some point by President Biden himself about what to double down on in the negotiations, and he didn't favor the higher ed programs. So I don't think community college folks are going to abandon him or feel like he's not supporting them, but I think there is a feeling of losing out again, and maybe losing a historic opportunity.

TAMARA HILER: Doug, do you think that there are two Lucies in that situation, though? So Charlie Brown would be the community colleges, but I think the Lucies include both the Democratic administrations and I also think it is their peers in higher education saying that we support you, we support you, and then lifting the football at the end as well. So I think unfortunately, they have two Lucies that they're

fighting.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Community colleges have, even as they've in a lot of states become not the favored child, the flagships are always going to be the favored child, but the community colleges have sort of gained ground in terms of their standing. I think they just continue to lose out at the federal level, and I think you're right, it's as much a lack of support from some of their peers as anything.

How much do you think, and, Tamara, I think I know where you come down, given what you said before and we're polling, but what are these collective developments say about the status of higher education, I mean, literally about the economic status, and we've sort of suggested that between the enrollment figures and that there may be more vulnerable institutions than there were before, so both from an economic standpoint, but also from a sort of standing standpoint, what do you view this week as saying about the state of higher education in the public view and in the view of policymakers? Should people who care about higher education be concerned now about how the world is viewing higher education and whether people want to invest in it individually, collectively as a society, etc.? Tamara...

TAMARA HILER: Yeah, so I mean, I will continue to say that I think it's still a little too early to make any real assessment about sort of that long-term effects on higher education, given that we are, there's still a lot in play with this pandemic that we need to be paying attention to. So I'll be more curious to have this conversation in two to three years to see how enrollment trends, completion trends, you know, the things that we do need to be keeping an eye on are going to eventually play out.

I think that it's easy for people to talk of the game and say that higher education doesn't matter. We see this play out in Congress, and that people need to forego higher education and just go straight into the job market, But then at the same time they were sending their own kids to higher ed because, at the end of the day, I do think people still continue to see the value. They understand the return on investment in higher education does eventually play out. That being said, we know that we're at sort of a fever pitch in terms of the conversation. We know that institutions and states and the federal government, like we do have to do something to address the affordability crisis that's at hand. And so I hope that we just continue to use this moment as an inflection point to really reassess and hopefully make some additional changes to the way that we make college affordable and also, once again, focusing on completion and the things that we do know can exacerbate some of the affordability crises that we're seeing throughout the system.

TERESA PARROT: I'm always a Pollyanna about this industry, so although I'm probably sounding like a

grump on the podcast today, I really am a Pollyanna about the industry. And for that reason, I think that I'm always optimistic about what our potential is. That doesn't mean that we're not going to shift, that doesn't mean that we're not going to see some closures, or we're going to have to be thinking differently about what it is that we offer and to whom, but I will always be optimistic about higher education because of the opportunities that I know that it brings.

And I also think that this is a moment for us to be thinking about how we are choosing our own adventure. Those students that we have as undergraduates now that have increased trust, but we need to maintain that increased trust. Those are going to be the students that to Tamara's point, in two to three years are looking graduate school. And we need to have that pipeline across the system, whether it's for community college students going to undergrad, going to graduate school, however we're thinking about that, we need to be thinking now about how are we shoring up all of our enrollment across the entire system, because as we're seeing, right now we have an uptick in graduate education, that doesn't have to be the case. And that may not be the case if we don't plan well now. So I'm always optimistic, with some calculated risks and some calculated investments.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Robert, last word...

ROBERT KELCHEN: I have a mix of optimism and pessimism, that enrollment looks to be a challenge for several years to come, which is a challenge for colleges. It's good news to some extent for students, though, because colleges aren't going to be able to raise their prices unless they're already \$60,000 a year. That helps on the affordability side, plus state budgets look pretty good for the next couple of years, and we have more money likely coming from Washington. All those are good things in the short term.

In the long term, we still have issues about the budget cuts that may come from decreased enrollment. Trust is still an issue, and I'll also just flag that across the ideological spectrum there are at least some concerns about higher education. And the story that's just breaking out of Hawaii about their legislature not being too happy with what faculty are doing. That's telling that that's one of the most liberal states in the country, it's not going as far as, say, Florida, but there's skepticism across the board and it's up to higher education as a whole to make its case that it has value.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was, in reverse order, Robert Kelchen of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Teresa Parrot of TVP Communications, and Tamara Hiler, director of education at Third Way. Thanks to them for their insights on an eventful last few days in higher education news, and thanks to

Formstack for its support of The Key and important conversations about postsecondary education and students. That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next week, stay well and stay safe.

[MUSIC]