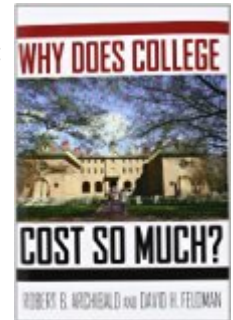


Robert B. Archibald, David H. Feldman. *Why Does College Cost So Much?*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 304 S. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-974450-3.



Reviewed by Johannes Westberg

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (February, 2012)

Robert Archibald's and David Feldman's book deals with a complex topic of great significance: the cost and price of education. In the history of education and economics of education, these are key issues, not least if we want to grasp the internal workings of the educational system. Since the price of putting your child in college increased almost six fold between 1981 and 2006, and the fact that access to education is an important part of the American dream of being able to raise one's standard of living, this is also of great personal interest for many Americans. That the cost of college education has thus also become an important policy issue is therefore not surprising.

Archibald's and Feldman's book targets both scientists and politicians, and has a transparent outline that follows from the author's argument. The study begins with a classic enigma with no obvious explanation: why has the cost of college education in the United States increased so rapidly? In the introduction to the book, the authors distance themselves from the political view that the increased cost is a simple matter of waste and maladministration, and an internal university

perspective from which rising costs seem unavoidable. Instead, they orient their perspective around the economics of education, with the intention of providing the reader with a detailed explanation of the rising costs of college education.

Instead of studying higher education as an isolated field, governed by the greater purpose of education, Archibald and Feldman apply the viewpoint of the discipline of economics. This means that higher education is perceived as one industry among others. While the authors are careful to point out that they do not want to reduce higher education to something it is not – for example, they do not claim that students are only customers – they do show that it is possible to compare the costs of higher education with those of other kinds of services.

This insight results in a clear perception of the societal context of higher education. Instead of trying to find the explanation to increased costs within the field of higher education, Archibald and Feldman claim that such an explanation can be identified in the development of the U.S. economy, and primarily in the production of goods and

services in general. In this way, they succeed in making an otherwise excessively abstract issue into a manageable question, or actually two questions: Why are college costs rising faster than other costs, and, above all, why did the cost of other goods rise more slowly than the costs of higher education?

In the second part of the book, Archibald and Feldman describe how technological developments in the U.S. affected the production of goods and services, and hence the cost of higher education. Studying the developments of these areas, it is evident that the cost of higher education has risen significantly faster than, for example, the cost of furniture, new cars, china and glassware. But it is striking that the cost of higher education has followed a similar pattern to the costs of the services of dentists, physicians and lawyers. In this respect, Archibald and Feldman conclude that the rising costs of higher education are not all that remarkable. Instead, they are portrayed as a consequence of the technological developments that in general keep costs down for companies that manufacture goods, often through making it possible to produce more goods with lower labour input. However, this does not apply to the services of dentists, physicians and higher education, where technical developments affect the quality of the service rather than the need for labour input. Consequently, the cost of higher education will increase more quickly than the cost of a car, for example.

In addition, technological progress has created a demand for highly educated workers that the colleges have not been able to meet during the last thirty years. This raised demand has affected the salaries of educated workers, and increased the costs for hiring not only college professors but also physicians and dentists. Technological developments have also affected the services sector in a different way. As the authors note, technological development can either imply that the same product can be produced at a lower price, or that the

product can be produced with a higher quality. In the context of higher education, which aims to provide students with an up-to-date service, this has meant raised costs.

In the third part of the book, Archibald and Feldman consider the price that parents pay for the college education of their children. An important distinction is made between the costs and the price of higher education. They find that, despite the rapid increase in the costs of producing higher education, this has not necessarily implied an increase in the price that the consumer – students and their parents – has to pay for higher education through college tuition and fees. Instead of dealing with the conditions that affect the production of higher education, as in part two, this part of the book consequently deals with the issue of affordability of college education. As in previous chapters, the authors claim that this is not a question that can be answered with reference only to higher education. Instead, the affordability of higher education can only be estimated by relating the price of college education with household income, and what goods and services that can be purchased for these.

Apropos of this, the authors conclude that the price of college education has come to take up an increasingly large part of families' budgets. Calculated in percentages, households have less left to spend on other goods and services. However, since the development of the U.S. economy has increased the households' income, and made many goods more affordable, this means that households in general have more left to spend after their children's education has been paid. College has thus become more affordable for a large part of the middle class, except for the segment of the U.S. population that is stuck in the bottom of the widening income distribution gap in America.

In summary, this book tackles a very complex subject in a way that should be appealing to a broad audience. The authors' analysis is sufficiently simple to be powerful, and complex

enough to be convincing. In addition, the book deals with an important topic that also touches on the subject of the increasing cost of the public sector, which is a crucial political issue in many European countries. Demonstrating how the costs of service production are affected by technological development, and not primarily by processes within the public sector, Archibald's and Feldman's analysis of higher education in the U.S. offers a refreshing perspective on this discussion, where a lack of efficiency and incentive are often presented as an explanation for the rising costs of health care, elementary education and so on.

As an historian of education, it is easy to be impressed by the manner in which Archibald and Feldman handle the U.S. history of higher education. They avoid explaining developments within this field by way of the actions of individuals, which is a pitfall that some historians of education still fall in. Instead, they study the structures and process which politicians and college-administrators must navigate in. This is more impressive since the study deals with such a politicized field, where heroes and villains should be easy to identify, depending on the authors' political views.

Archibald and Feldman also succeed in contextualizing higher education. Avoiding studying education in splendid isolation, they connect developments within higher education with developments in U.S. economy. In itself, this is not noteworthy. Since the 1960s, it has been commonplace to relate developments within education to broader social trends and structures. But as Konrad Jarausch once noted, such references to society "are often more liturgical than explanatory." Konrad Jarausch, *The Old "New History of Education": A German Reconsideration*, in: *History of Education Quarterly* 26 (1986), p. 235. Archibald and Feldman do not just repeat mantras of globalization or post-industrialism, but identify a number of specific developments within U.S. society that affect the rising costs of producing higher education,

and the rising prices of college education for some segments of the U.S. population. The way in which this is done is perhaps the most impressive feature of this study.

Above all, this study demonstrates the potential for researching education as if the subject was something else than just education. Archibald and Feldman acknowledge the fact that higher education has particular characteristics, but succeeds in treating the history of higher education since World War II as a history of the production of services within this sector. This means that they can leave conventional wisdom on higher education behind, and view the processes of college education from an economist's point of view, benefitting from the methods and concepts of this discipline. This encourages the rest of us, who devote ourselves to the history of education, to embark on a similar journey, treating issues such as the politics, finances and experience of education not primarily as a history of education, but as economic, cultural, agrarian or political history, without becoming too myopic and obsessed by the fact that education is the object under study.

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Citation: Johannes Westberg. Review of Archibald, Robert B.; Feldman, David H. *Why Does College Cost So Much?*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

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