America's Best Colleges
Not-So-Public Schools
Glenn C. Altschuler and David J. Skorton 08.11.10, 6:00 PM ET

For centuries, higher education was a privilege enjoyed by the wealthy, designed to produce (mostly male) graduates who had read the classics, some in the original Latin or Greek.

In 1862 Abraham Lincoln, born into poverty with a hunger for education that was only lightly fed, signed the Morrill Act, providing federal funds to establish land grant universities for each state. These colleges, and hundreds of two- and four-year public institutions that were founded in the 20th century, were designed to provide access to higher education to state residents of all economic strata and to train students for the Industrial and Post-Industrial workforce.

An equally powerful effect was to expose young Americans to knowledge, which an earlier Congress characterized as "necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind." With 70% of undergraduates in the United States now enrolling in public colleges and universities, it remains a powerful marriage of democratic values and practical necessity.

These days, however, public education is in trouble. From California to Michigan to Florida to New York, we are seeing the future--and it doesn't work. State support for higher education isn't what it used to be, and the trend is down.

In 1980 state appropriations comprised 45.6% of revenues at public colleges and universities. In 1995 state support dropped to 35.8%, and by 2008--the most recent year for which figures are available--appropriations accounted for 25.4% of revenues. To be sure, some of this reduction is due to other sources of funds (tuition, grants, philanthropy) rising at much more rapid rates than public funds. But some is due as well to inflation-adjusted reductions in state funding to colleges and universities.

About 40 states expect revenue shortfalls for the 2011 fiscal year, and as many states already predict midyear reductions for higher education amounting to nearly $34 billion.

The need to enhance revenue has forced public schools to resemble their private counterparts. A few decades ago, colleges within the State University of New York system were discouraged from soliciting funds from alumni. Now phonathons and direct marketing campaigns are a regular part of the academic year.

But private philanthropy cannot close the gap. That leaves public colleges and universities with no recourse but to raise tuition and fees. The cost of tuition at four-year public colleges more than quadrupled from 1980 to 2007. The average undergraduate tuition increase from 1998 to
2008 was 87% at public institutions, compared with 64% at private schools. And the hikes continue.

The result: Higher education, the engine of equal opportunity in the United States, is increasingly out of reach for many Americans. This year, for example, California public institutions raised tuition and fees by 32%, admitted more out-of-state and international applicants who pay the higher non-resident sticker price, and fewer of the academically talented but economically disadvantaged in-state students it was built to serve.

At a flagship university in the Midwest, more than half the freshman class now comes from families with six-figure incomes, in a state where only 13% of families earn that much. At Fayetteville State University in North Carolina, tuition will rise almost 20% over the next two years. It was the smallest hike in the state system, but sophomore Nieve Vasquez says "It's going to be harder now" to finish her major in criminal justice.

Proposals to increase expenditures of state tax dollars must fight the headwinds of public opinion; the legitimate concerns of deficit hawks; responsible critics of wasteful practices and a failure to set priorities in institutions of higher education; and competition with other compelling human service needs. There is strong sentiment for curtailing the size, scope and cost of government, including commitments to public education. It's a debate worth having, so here are our premises:

First, in a world of bewildering change, the acquisition of knowledge, aesthetic and technical, the development of critical thinking and the habit of lifelong learning are ever more relevant and imperative.

Second, in an increasingly complex and competitive world, higher education is essential. It is in the interest of every American to invest in the U.S. by investing in the next generation. As administrators of a global research university, we have seen evidence of that kind of investment by our competitors in countries from China to Singapore to Saudi Arabia.

A century ago Willis Carrier, a farm boy from a small town in New York, received a state scholarship to Cornell University to study engineering. In 1906 he patented a system that regulates indoor temperature and humidity so the machinery in printing shops and textile factories would run more smoothly. Carrier called it an "Apparatus for Treating Air." We call it air conditioning.

The country that develops the next generation of energy technology is likely to dominate world markets. It's a race in which there are as yet no clear front-runners. If the collective "we" fails to support public colleges and universities and shut out tomorrow's Willis Carriers, America is likely to finish out of the money.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies and vice president for university relations at Cornell University. David J. Skorton is a professor of medicine, pediatrics and biomedical engineering and president of Cornell University.