

# FAILING OUR FUTURE:

## The cost of defunding higher education in Iowa

SEIU Faculty Forward, April 2018

At a time when teachers across the country are on strike over inadequate funding for our public schools, new research demonstrates that those challenges are not confined to K-12 education. In fact, over the past decade and a half, Iowa politicians have cut funding for colleges and universities by more than \$180 million.<sup>1</sup> Worse yet, they may be on the cusp of passing another round of cuts.

To make up for these shortfalls, the state is asking students and their families to pay more. Rising tuition is forcing students to take on more debt and work long hours at jobs outside of school – and sometimes face hunger and homelessness. Larger class sizes and broken or outdated teaching equipment and facilities are eroding educational quality. The compensation of college instructors is stagnant and far from keeping up with the rising cost of living. This report, which combines data from Iowa’s public higher education institutions with a survey of 323 Iowa faculty, documents the damage caused by 15 years of disinvestment. As one faculty member lamented, “we built world-class institutions, and are now slowly strangling them.”<sup>2</sup>

‘We built world-class institutions and are now slowly strangling them.’

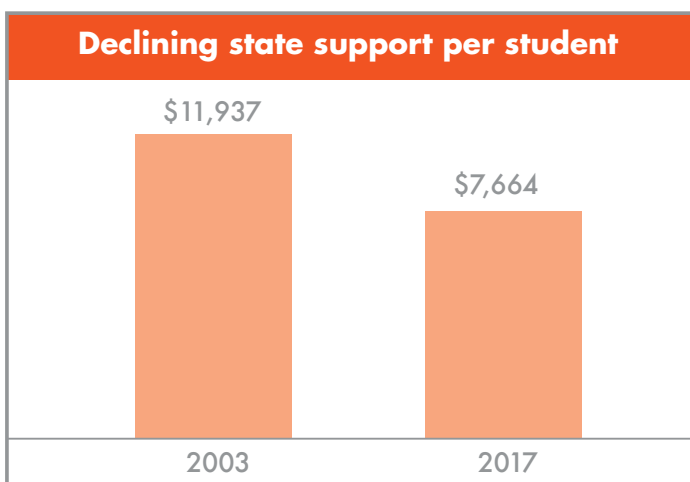
–Surveyed faculty member

Seeking to reverse this downward spiral, part-time and non-tenure-track faculty are organizing with SEIU Faculty Forward. They are calling on educators at Iowa public colleges and universities to join in demanding adequate funding for public higher education and a voice for faculty on campuses across the state.

While more and more jobs demand education beyond high school, graduation rates at Iowa’s flagship public universities are slipping compared to peers. This endangers Iowans’ economic future and our state’s ability to compete. As legislators consider next year’s budget, they must reverse the degradation of Iowa’s higher education system and instead invest in the future of our students, our families, our educators and our state.

### Funding Down, Enrollment Up

- The Iowa governor and legislature cut state funding for public higher education in Iowa by more than \$180 million between 2003 and 2017 after adjusting for inflation.<sup>3</sup>
- During that same time period, enrollment grew, causing spending per student to drop by 26%.<sup>4</sup> The state is now contributing \$2,216 less per student than it did in 2003.<sup>5</sup>
- The three Regents Universities (the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Northern Iowa) have been especially hard hit. State funding per student declined by \$4,273 in total across the three Regents Universities between 2003 and 2017.<sup>6</sup>
- Over the past year alone the legislature has cut Regents Universities’ funding by more than \$40 million.<sup>7</sup>



Figures for Regents universities  
Source: SEIU calculations from Board of Regents data

## Faculty, students and families bear burden of cuts

Iowa's elected leaders used to treat higher education as an investment in the public good, seeking to make college accessible to most Iowans. Now, they are shifting the costs of higher education to students and their families. After adjusting for inflation, tuition and fees are up 25% at the University of Iowa and 20% at Iowa State University from 2003 to 2017.<sup>8</sup> And, the Board of Regents will vote in June on a plan to raise tuition even more – by 3.8 % at the University of Iowa and Iowa State and 2.8% at the University of Northern Iowa.<sup>9</sup> As a result of earlier increases, students at public colleges in Iowa covered 60% of schools' costs in 2016.<sup>10</sup> That's up from 35% in 2001, and the share paid by students and their families is bound to increase as 2017 and 2018 figures become available.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Iowa students are increasingly burdened by the cost of college. They often work long hours to pay for school and graduate with tens of thousands of dollars in debt. Significant proportions of Iowa students struggle with basic needs such as food and housing. On average, Iowans graduate with nearly \$30,000 in student-loan debt, and nearly two-thirds of Iowa graduates have at least some debt.<sup>12</sup> The problem is particularly acute at the University of Iowa where the proportion of residents graduating without debt fell from 43% in 2002 to 35% in 2016.<sup>13</sup>

'Students have told me that they have no time to do the reading or get any sort of education.'  
–Surveyed faculty member

In an online survey of Iowa faculty conducted in March 2018, three-fourths of respondents reported that students sometimes or often tell them they are having difficulty paying for college without borrowing more than they can afford.<sup>14</sup> Some instructors told of students piling on courses trying to graduate more quickly with less debt, compromising their ability to learn. "Students pay for the first 12 hours of classes each semester at UI, but then they can take up to 6 more hours for free," one faculty member explained. "So students often take 18 hours, and then have a demanding part-time job, so that they can graduate in a timely

manner and not take on too much debt. Students have told me that, of course, they have no time to do the reading or get any sort of education under these circumstances."<sup>15</sup>

### *Students' hardships include homelessness & hunger*

Surveyed faculty see several other indicators that their students are close to the edge:

- One in seven said students "often" or "sometimes" told faculty they lacked reliable housing or were even homeless.<sup>16</sup>
- Roughly one in eight also observed students who lack consistent, reliable access to food.<sup>17</sup> Similar findings on a 2016 University of Iowa student survey prompted the students and staff to open a food pantry on campus.<sup>18</sup>
- Thirty percent of surveyed faculty said their students are often forced to work too many hours to succeed in their studies.<sup>19</sup> "One of my students works nights and attends classes during the day," said one faculty member. "Their only sleep is to take a nap between classes."<sup>20</sup>
- Over half– 54% – of those surveyed said students "often" or "sometimes" tell them they can't afford textbooks.<sup>21</sup> "We use sub-par books so that students might be able to afford them, but I'm not sure it works because they see the reduced value as well," commented one faculty member.<sup>22</sup>

### *Impact on low-income students and students of color*

These economic stresses hit hardest at low-income students and students of color. According to a recent study, the average net price paid by African American students attending public four-year college in Iowa is over half of the median income for African American households in the state.<sup>23</sup> And, even after taking federal grants and scholarships

into account, the average low-income Iowa resident would have to work 25 hours per week throughout the year in addition to their studies to make ends meet.<sup>24</sup> Researchers have found lower retention rates among students who work more than 15 hours per week.<sup>25</sup>

## **Crumbling classrooms & educational quality**

As politicians have cut funding, key measures of educational quality and of students' completion of their education have suffered. Studies show that funding per student is one of the strongest predictors for college graduation<sup>26</sup> and that higher state funding correlates with higher college enrollment and completion rates.<sup>27</sup> After years of budget cuts, graduation rates at both the University of Iowa and Iowa State University are lower than those at peer universities.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, average time to graduation across all three Regents Universities is worse than the national average.<sup>29</sup> Ten years ago, it was better than average.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Stuck in larger classes***

Larger classes undercut faculty-student interaction, which is an important indicator of academic achievement.<sup>31</sup> The share of students in large classes at the University of Iowa has grown to the point where almost half (48%) of all student credit hours in fall of 2017 were spent in classes with 50 or more students.<sup>32</sup> At Iowa State, the share of classes with 50 or more students climbed from 19% of all classes in 2003 to 25% in 2017.<sup>33</sup>

Almost half of all credit hours at the University of Iowa are in classes with 50 or more students.

### ***Broken equipment and deteriorating facilities***

Sixty-two percent of surveyed faculty reported problems with inadequate equipment or facilities that can hurt the quality of students' education.<sup>34</sup> "Technology used in their future job world is expensive, and we often substitute cheaper option[s], reducing the quality of their education,"<sup>35</sup> said one survey respondent. The problems are significant, according to the survey:

- Fifty-three percent of faculty report overcrowded classrooms and/or broken, outdated, or inadequate computers, software, AV equipment, or lab facilities.<sup>36</sup>
- Seventeen percent of faculty reported fire hazards, inadequate, broken or disabled building security, or other building code violations that could put student and faculty safety at risk.<sup>37</sup>

## **Impact on educators**

Faculty are the backbone of Iowa's public higher education system, but stagnant wages, decreased job security and being asked time and again to do more with less is taking its toll. Regents Universities are increasingly dependent on adjunct faculty who teach on short-term contracts, often semester to semester, and are paid significantly less than tenure-track faculty. Data from the Department of Education shows that the proportion of non-tenure track faculty at the three Regents Universities grew 24% from 2003 to 2016, so that one in three faculty at Regents schools are now contingent.<sup>38</sup>

Adjunct instructors in Iowa earn an estimated average of \$4,600 per course.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, adjuncts teaching three courses per semester may earn an estimated \$27,600. "While we qualify for food stamps, we don't use them because we don't feel right about it," said one full-time non-tenure track faculty member, "We have no savings. We don't own a house. ... I ride my bike to work because I cannot afford to pay for parking ... I would love to be able to teach without the distraction of wondering if I'll be able to make ends meet for next month."<sup>40</sup>

## *Stagnant salaries*

Both adjunct and tenure-track faculty are seeing their wages erode. One in three faculty surveyed report that they have received no raises in the past 5 years—which amounts to a pay cut after inflation.<sup>41</sup> Six percent of respondents said they had seen their pay actually cut even without factoring in inflation.<sup>42</sup>

Official data bear out the faculty survey. At the University of Iowa the average faculty salary is the lowest it has been in 10 years relative to peers.<sup>43</sup> Iowa State University's average faculty salary is the second lowest among its 10 peer schools.<sup>44</sup> And, at the University of Northern Iowa, the average faculty salary has not kept pace with inflation over the past 10 years, meaning most faculty there have effectively received a pay cut over the decade.<sup>45</sup>

## *Unpaid work*

Budget cuts have come with increased workloads for 80% of faculty surveyed.<sup>46</sup> Over half of the respondents report greater service obligations,<sup>47</sup> and half say they face increased administrative work and training.<sup>48</sup> Forty-three percent of faculty said their classes have increased in size,<sup>49</sup> and 19% have taken on additional classes or sections without increased pay.<sup>50</sup>

As a result, nearly a third of those surveyed said they work 10 or more hours a week on tasks that are beyond their job description or contract.<sup>51</sup> “It seems like the general public thinks that all professors are *underworked* and *overpaid*,” said one respondent, whose course enrollment has doubled from 45 students to 90. “I have received zero pay increase for doing more work and bringing in substantially more tuition dollars.”<sup>52</sup>

## *Faculty are starting to leave Iowa*

Stagnating pay may be prompting a faculty exodus. University of Iowa leadership says the school is losing top faculty to schools that pay better.<sup>53</sup> Overall, at Regents schools, faculty resignations were 11% higher in the last two years than the average over the decade from 2006 to 2015.<sup>54</sup> One faculty member commented, “we dedicate ourselves to giving back... but the state keeps taking and taking... I've been working for less for years and [am] told to do more. ... If our legislature doesn't change priorities, I'll move away permanently. ... my thoughts about this are shared by nearly EVERY faculty I meet at every level.”<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion: Iowa's future in the balance**

Study after study shows the benefits that investment in higher education brings to a state's residents and economy as a whole. Federal Reserve economists have found that a state's high school and college graduation rates are important factors in a state's per-capita income growth.<sup>56</sup> While Iowa ranks highly among states in the proportion of residents with high school degrees, it is near the bottom – 35<sup>th</sup> in the nation – in the proportion of residents with bachelor's or higher degrees.<sup>57</sup> This gap hurts all Iowans. Not only do those with college or advanced degrees earn more than those without degrees, studies have found that an increase in the number of college degree holders increases wages for those with no college as well.<sup>58</sup> Given these benefits, it is unsurprising that researchers have found that states typically earn a \$3-\$4 return for every dollar spent on higher education.<sup>59</sup>

In the face of this evidence, cutting higher education makes little sense: Iowa's struggle to generate enough revenue means politicians should be investing in higher education, not cutting back. In the long term, continued disinvestment in higher education will only contribute to lower incomes for Iowans, generating further declines in tax receipts and greater demands for social services. This will accelerate the vicious cycle of cuts to public services and infrastructure that Iowans depend on. As one faculty member stated, “Public higher education has been an economic driver of prosperity in the U.S. This short-sighted decrease in state support will damage our country's economy in the future.”<sup>60</sup>

‘Public higher education has been a driver of prosperity in the U.S. This short-sighted decrease in state support will damage our economy.’  
–Surveyed faculty member

This year, part-time and non-tenure-track faculty at the University of Iowa are calling on colleagues at public colleges and universities across the state to join in their effort to organize a union with SEIU Faculty Forward to win a voice for themselves and their students and demand that politicians reinvest in education.

## **Methodology**

This report combines government data and reports with the results of an online survey of 323 faculty members teaching at Iowa community colleges and the three Regents Universities. The survey was conducted from March 20 to March 27, 2018. Public data used in this report were obtained from individual institutions' Common Data Set reports, Board of Regents reports, the State Higher Education Officers Association, and the National Center for Education Statistics' IPEDS database.

## **About SEIU Faculty Forward**

Faculty Forward is a nationwide movement of faculty members, graduate student workers, students, families and community members. We are uniting to demand good stable jobs with fair wages and benefits for all faculty and graduate teaching assistants and affordable, accessible, quality higher education for all students. Through Faculty Forward, more than 54,000 faculty on more than 60 campuses have formed unions and joined students and community members to challenge the status quo of poor working conditions, student debt and limited access to higher education.

Faculty Forward is a project of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), a union of almost 2 million members.



## Endnotes

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