



# We had it easier

**It's always tempting to tell our kids how much rougher we had it back in the day.** The minimum wage in 1973 was a measly \$1.60 an hour, which sounds horrible until you realize that would be \$9.46 an hour today when adjusted for inflation, significantly higher than Nevada's current minimum wage. Women were fighting hard for the right to control their own health care decisions, culminating in the 1973 Supreme Court decision to legalize abortions, a decision states like Alabama are undercutting by passing laws that make it impossible for abortion clinics to survive. And don't even think of bringing up how you struggled to pay college tuition 45 years ago compared to what today's students face.

When I was searching for affordable higher education in the mid '70s as the first person in my family to go to a four-year college, the options in California made me dizzy. I had the grades to get into the state colleges and most of the University of California (UC) schools, but I had little financial support and no cash reserves of my

own after a gap year as an exchange student in Madrid.

What I didn't realize at the time was how lucky I was to be a California resident with my pick of high-quality, affordable colleges heavily subsidized by the state. Community colleges were essentially free, and the academic caliber was excellent. Tuition and fees at state colleges were very low—after state grants, scholarships and favorable residency rates, I paid about \$60 a semester for unlimited credits at Sonoma State. Tuition was about double that at the prestigious University of California schools, but I chose a state college simply because it was cheaper, supporting myself with a half-time job at the campus library. I took a ridiculous number of credits since it was a one-price system, but I graduated in three years debt-free, sharing a ramshackle house in Santa Rosa with friends, bumming rides to campus, living lightly.

How times have changed. The Sacramento Bee recently reported on a data analysis from the California Budget and

Policy Center that adjusted 1979 college tuition and fees for inflation and determined the cost of attending a University of California school is now six times greater than it was 40 years ago. The cost of attending a college or university in the state system has risen an astounding 1,360 percent since 1979.

Amy Rose, the study's author, says it's much harder to find affordable higher education now. "The 'back in my day' narrative is tempting on the surface. ... Many students in prior generations were able to work moderate hours and attend school full-time, graduating on time and with little to no debt. Today's students face a much different scenario, with significantly higher total costs of attendance, largely due to rising housing costs," she wrote.

Rose says students in California now graduate with at least \$20,000 in debt thanks to budget cuts over the years that shifted costs from state funding to students who "are more likely to be students of color and the costs of tuition and basic needs

are, therefore, more likely to be a barrier to them accessing a high-quality education. They are also more likely to experience poor academic, health, and mental health outcomes which can snowball into them taking part-time classes, dropping courses, or skipping semesters which means that they take longer to graduate."

Rose suggests state legislators start investing in higher education again to keep California's economy competitive. She also wants them to implement policies to address increasing homelessness and hunger among college students and find ways to drastically reduce student debt.

Subsidizing higher educational opportunities for lower- and middle-class students not only helps them, it's the tide that lifts all boats. □

The study referenced here can be read at [tinyurl.com/yve4t4s9](http://tinyurl.com/yve4t4s9). A study on hunger and other needs among college students can be read here: [tinyurl.com/yxwxldtq](http://tinyurl.com/yxwxldtq)

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