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Who Foots Most of the Bill for Public Colleges? In 28 States, It's Students

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A new milestone has been reached in the [decades-long trend](#) of state disinvestment in higher education, according to a [new study](#). Tuition dollars, not state and local funding, have become the primary revenue source for public higher education in most states.

It's the first time, according to the [State Higher Education Executive Officers](#), that more than half of the states have relied so heavily on students to finance operations. During the 2017 fiscal year, the association reports, 28 states leaned chiefly on students, not on taxpayers.

Tuition dollars, which amounted to \$72.3 billion nationwide, accounted for 46.4 percent of overall revenue for public higher education, according to the association's report.

Vermont's system of public universities and colleges relied the most on tuition revenue, with 86.6 percent of its funds coming from students. At the opposite end of the spectrum, tuition money accounted for only 14.7 percent of the revenue at Wyoming's public institutions.

While the trends reflected in the report are by no means new, they are stark. In 2000 tuition dollars paid by students accounted for more than half of revenue in just three states.

The national numbers have moved substantially in the last decade. In 2008 tuition accounted for just 35.8 percent of all public-higher-education revenue nationally. But the burden on students actually peaked in 2013, when tuition accounted for 47.8 percent of all such revenue nationwide.

Reliance on tuition revenue has typically intensified in the wake of recessions like that of 2007-8, and has continued even when the economic shock seemed to have passed. Among the many factors contributing to public disinvestment: The share of Medicaid costs borne by states has [more than doubled](#) since 1987, absorbing funds that might otherwise have been devoted to colleges.

Adjusting for inflation, only six states now fund public higher education at prerecession levels, according to the report. In some states, meanwhile, tuition revenue is down as well. Missouri, whose public universities have been [beset by plummeting enrollments](#), experienced the largest loss of net tuition per full-time-equivalent student from the 2016 to the 2017 fiscal years, a

drop of 10.8 percent.

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