

Cost of Public vs. Private Colleges

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We often hear students say that they would like to go to a private college after high school. They often follow that statement up with "But we can't afford it." We tell students not to rule out a private college until after all the financial aid information and packages have been determined because private colleges work hard at getting the cost down for families so that it is pretty comparable to the U of M system. Private colleges have more money to award in scholarships than public colleges do.

While a first look at the cost of a private college definitely produces sticker shock, the yearly tuition cost of any college can be deceiving. State colleges like to impress upon people the affordability of an education at their schools. While it's true that tuition is less expensive, it's also true that fewer students graduate in four years at state schools than at private schools. The average yearly cost of tuition and fees at the four-year state colleges is about \$7,680.00. At the U of M, the average is \$12,605.00. And at private colleges, the average is \$35,809.00. What's interesting is when you start looking at the percentage of students that actually complete a degree in four years. The most recent data available shows the number of full-time freshman entering college in 2007 at the state colleges was 16,853. Of that number, 34% completed their degree in four years. At the U of M, 44% of entering freshman graduated in four years. At private colleges, the number of entering freshman was 8,822, with 65% completing their degree in four years. That's a fairly significant difference. With each additional year spent in college, the costs just keep adding up.

There is plenty of information available regarding the cost and the value of the education a person receives. Of course, every student, family and situation is unique. Also, there's no argument that a quality education is available at all the schools that Minnesota has. It is, however, important to look at the likelihood of a student completing their degree in four years rather than five or six. Each additional year a student spends in a state college or the U of M equates to another \$8,000-\$12,000 spent just in tuition. If one adds on the "cost" of potential earnings lost, then the cost is even higher.

People are often surprised at what private colleges offer students and families in terms of financial help. Because private schools know their costs are high and they have more aid to award students, the average scholarship award at a private college is over \$19,000.

Where do two-year schools fit in? While the cost of tuition is certainly less expensive at a two-year school, the overall cost is not necessarily less. If a student is able to stay at home, then a two-year school is certainly a great option. However, if a student plans to attend a school where he or she will need to find and pay for housing, and the other costs that accompany housing, then the cost starts to go up quite quickly.

Where a student ultimately decides to attend college has to be his/her choice. Each option has its pros and cons. Options should not be eliminated solely based on initial cost until all factors have been considered. In the counseling center, we are always willing to talk over these options with students and their families.