

Education Policy

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# Virginia Foxx paid \$87.50 in Tuition in 1961

BLOG POST



Virginia Foxx / Flickr

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Representative Virginia Foxx (R - NC) has no patience for students who whine about their student loan debt. After all, she was able to work her way through college without taking on a single penny of debt. According to Foxx, “We live in an opportunity society... You don’t sit on your butt and have [a college education] dumped in your lap.” Thank goodness we have someone like Foxx who is willing to push back against those lazy, whiny, and entitled student borrowers. “Kids these days have no work ethic,” you can almost hear her say, “when I was at the University of North Carolina, I worked hard to pay my exorbitant tuition of \$87.50.”

That's right, Virginia Foxx paid \$87.50 in tuition. That was the price of a full semester's tuition at UNC in 1961. The Chair of the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training is completely out of touch with the very different realities facing today's students.

To be fair, prices have gone up a lot since 1961. If you take that \$87.50 and adjust it for inflation, the actual dollar amount is a whopping \$671.30 per semester. Including tuition and fees, Representative Foxx would have paid \$279 for the academic year—about \$2,140 today. That's about equivalent to what students pay right now at community colleges, not public four-year institutions—especially not public flagships.

In-state students at Representative Foxx's alma mater pay \$7,008—more than three times what Foxx paid. It took Foxx seven years to graduate, probably because she was working to put herself through college. During the 7-year period she was at UNC, tuition and fees increased about 0.6 percent per year. Compare that to UNC students who have seen their tuition and fees increase on average 7.2 percent per year since 2005. UNC students who take fewer classes in order to subsidize their tuition through work have found themselves in a losing battle with steep tuition increases.

They have also come up against work that pays less and less. When Representative Foxx was working her way through college, the minimum wage was worth about \$9.62 in today's dollars. Today's students who work minimum wage jobs earn about 30 percent less per hour while paying much more in tuition. If Representative Foxx worked 20 hours a week for an entire year during her time at UNC, she would have made approximately \$9,795 before taxes, which would probably cover her entire cost of attendance. Using the same calculation, a student today working 20 hours a week for an entire year would make \$7,176. This would barely cover tuition and fees. It wouldn't even make a dent in the estimated full cost of attendance of \$20,660. Indeed, if a student worked 40 hours a week, a situation not feasible for a full-time student, he would only net \$14,352—still leaving a considerable gap. That gap is exactly where student loans have come into play.

Representative Foxx is not the first policymaker (nor will she be the last) to use a personal anecdotal story to undermine the very real plight of student borrowers. But this, "When I was their age..." argument needs to end. It's admirable to work your way through college and it was a real possibility to do so in the 1960s. For today's students, especially at four-year institutions, that opportunity has slipped away. The chair of such a critical congressional committee on education needs to stop shifting blame onto students and focus instead on the true problem: the continual disinvestment in public higher education by states and the subsequent shifting of cost by institutions onto students.

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