

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Alma Adams (NC-12)
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development
"Runaway College Spending Meets the Working Families Tax Cuts"
Wednesday, February 4, 2026 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

As this committee's first Higher Education and Workforce hearing of the year, I'm glad we're starting by focusing on what is top of mind for Americans across this country — rising costs.

Let me start with the facts: a college degree remains the surest path to the American Dream. It is still the most reliable engine of economic mobility we have. College graduates earn more, experience lower unemployment rates, and are better positioned to support their families and contribute to their communities. That basic truth has not changed.

What has changed dramatically, though, is the lack of state and federal investment in higher education. That lack of investment has shifted the cost onto students and their families.

From 1995 to 2025, the average published tuition and fees at colleges and universities have risen sharply, far outpacing wages, inflation, and household income. This is not a perception problem. It is a real problem for Americans in search of a better life. Families are being asked to pay more each year for the same credential, even as they are already stretched thin trying to survive.

We all agree there is a college affordability crisis in this country. Where we disagree is on the solution.

And we also need to be honest about what is and is not driving rising college costs. My Republican colleagues will say that this is about "administrative bloat." But the facts do not support that claim. Federal data shows that students still far outnumber staff at colleges and universities, including at highly selective institutions. Faculty make up a significant share of employees. And many schools appear staff-heavy only because they operate hospitals, research centers, and public service enterprises that serve communities far beyond their enrolled students.

When those roles are properly accounted for, the idea that colleges are overrun by administrators simply does not hold up.

Rising college costs are not driven by too many advisors, financial aid counselors, or student support staff. They are driven by decades of public disinvestment that have shifted costs onto students, while basic expenses like housing, food, and transportation continue to rise. Cutting staff does not make college more affordable. It makes it harder for students to stay enrolled and finish their degrees.

My colleagues on the other side of the aisle increasingly argue that higher education is a luxury that students, particularly low-income and first-generation students, simply shouldn't pursue if they can't afford it. Instead, they are told to "go learn a trade," or to attend lower-quality institutions with poor student outcomes, including for-profit schools with troubling track records.

So, let me be clear: the solution to the college affordability crisis cannot be that quality higher education is reserved only for the wealthy. We cannot accept a system where opportunity depends on zip code, family income, or whether your parents went to college. Telling students to lower their aspirations is not a serious policy response — it's a failure of leadership.

And the affordability crisis does not exist in a vacuum. Americans are struggling to afford basic necessities, including groceries, housing, child care, utilities, and health care. These pressures directly affect students' ability to enroll, persist, and graduate. Even when students arrive on campus, a recent survey found 3 in 5 experience food or housing insecurity. So, when we factor in access to transportation, child care, technology, and mental and physical health care, the number of students facing basic needs insecurity jumps to 3 in 4.

Yet instead of addressing these realities, recent policy choices have made them worse. Republicans continue to make cuts to food assistance, slash Medicaid, contribute to rising utility costs, and freeze child care funding, which all undermine economic security and, by extension, college access.

We also need to be honest about what's driving rising college costs. Republicans today will argue that colleges should lower costs by simply not investing [in] high-quality faculty and administrators, like career counselors and academic advisors, who help students reach the finish line. This spending is not the root cause of high tuition. In addition to stagnant state and federal investments, unchecked privatization and for-profit colleges have targeted low-income students, often leaving them with high debt and low-value credentials. Students from the lowest-income are twice as likely to enroll in for-profit colleges, and too often they pay the highest prices.

Finally, we can't ignore the elephant in the room, the Republicans' "Big Ugly Law," which makes this crisis worse. Changes to Pell Grants, new borrowing limits, and a restructured repayment system narrow the pathways to higher education, particularly for underserved communities. These reforms risk turning college into an expensive privilege rather than a public good.

This hearing is about one simple question: do we believe college should be accessible to everyone willing to work for it, or only to those who can afford it?

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to our discussion today. Thank you, and I yield back the balance of my time.