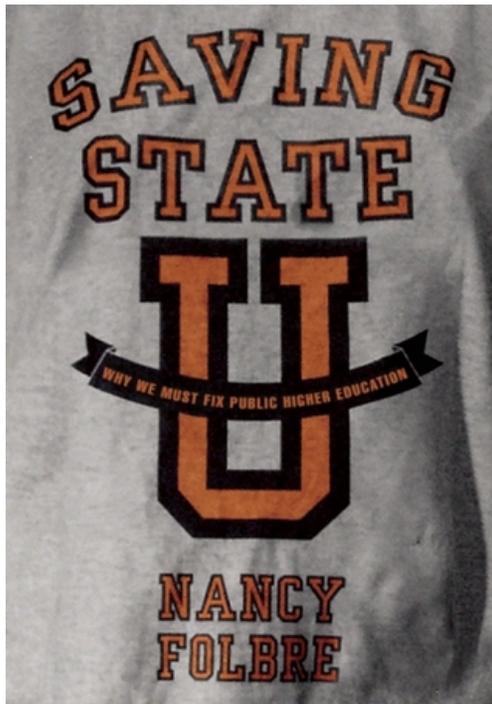


Unconventional Economist Sheds Light on Parenting, Higher Ed

BY [ERIC GOLDSCHIEDER](#) IN [TXEX](#) ON SEPTEMBER 5, 2012 AT 1:42 PM



Economist Nancy Folbre, BA '71, MA '74, is turning traditional thinking on its head—from the cost of child-rearing to the future of public higher education.

It should come as little surprise that when [Nancy Folbre](#) makes the provocative claim in one of her recent *New York Times* blog posts that, “today, people are more likely to think of children as pets, a discretionary source of affection and entertainment, perhaps even a luxury good,” there might be some pushback.

The University of Massachusetts professor of economics and a past recipient of the prestigious [MacArthur “genius” award](#) writes weekly for the *Economix* blog in the online edition of the *New York Times’ Business Day*. One of her headlines this summer was “[Price Tags for Parents](#),” in which she riffed on an

annual statistic the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) puts out on the cost of raising a baby born in 2011 to the age of 17. (That would be \$235,000.)

One commenter posted this tart ad homonym: “Once again, Folbre exudes colossal ignorance and reveals a bitter disdain for children, families, morals, and humanity.” It took her a while to get accustomed to “the rough and tumble world of the blogosphere... the insults that came my way were not infrequent,” she says. “‘You’re a lying liar from Liarsville,’ was one of my favorites.”

Given her long-standing interest in the roles parents and society play in nurturing the new generation—the people we are counting on to drive the economy as we get old—it’s logical that Folbre would at some point turn her gaze toward higher education. In her 2010 book, [Saving State U: Fixing Public Higher Education](#), she laments growing stratification as institutions that have historically promoted upward mobility keep getting hammered: “We are a country that used to pride itself on bootstrapping capabilities. There are just a lot of ways in which this is breaking down and this is one of them.”

Demand for a college degree is high, given that it’s by now almost a basic requirement for even the hope of a middle-class lifestyle. “Parents and students are willing to pay more because they are terrified about the future of the job market,” says Folbre. At the same time, supply is dwindling as legislatures keep seeing university systems as places to save money. “Tuition and fees are going up and that’s one of the reasons why the student debt crisis continues to get a lot of attention,” she says.

Folbre likens college to the scramble to get “to the top of the ladder.” But as the economy continues to

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deteriorate, the whole ladder is collapsing. In other words, even though it keeps getting more expensive, a degree no longer guarantees a decent job down the road. "It moves workers to the head of the line, but the whole line is sinking," Folbre says.

Her scholarship is part of a brand of feminism that puts as much emphasis on "care and responsibility" as it does on "rights and equality," Folbre says. "I do work that is really feminist, but also very pro-family, pro-community and pro-commitment." From her perch as a deadline economist at the *New York Times*, Folbre gets to chime in on issues of the day. She takes the potshots in stride because, after all, "most academics spend a lot of time writing stuff that very few people will ever read."

Folbre is known for asking why it is that people have children. Is it for the same reason we have pets? Do we want them just for personal gratification and to keep us company? The answer she keeps coming back to is that no matter what the motivation, the benefits of raising happy, productive, and capable beings enrich society as a whole. Put in economic terms, children are a public good. Yet the time, energy, money, and love that go into nurturing and educating the next generation are accounted for in ways that put the onus on parents. There is little recognition that the resources individuals expend on their young pay societal dividends.

Public education up to and including the university level is one of those ways in which society recognizes its self-interest in building up future taxpayers. But getting politicians to allocate money to match the easy platitudes is another thing. Folbre describes the funding fights she foresees in the near future as a "tug of war," the outcome of which will have a big impact on the nation our children will inhabit.

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