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CONTACTS: [Shannon Gallegos](#) 510/318-7915 [Gretchen Wright](#) 202/371-1999 [Gina Baleria](#) 510/318-7902

## Required for Nearly a Year, Many College Net Price Calculators Still Hard to Find, Use, Compare

*Report Analyzes Online Tools from Consumer Perspective, Recommends Specific Improvements*

(Oakland, CA) -- Since October 2011, nearly all U.S. colleges have been required to post “net price calculators” on their websites. Based on an in-depth look at 50 randomly selected colleges’ calculators, a [new report](#) from The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) found that many of these online tools are difficult for prospective college students and their families to find, use, and compare.

Congress required net price calculators to ensure that consumers could look past “sticker price” and get an early, individualized estimate of what a specific college might cost them. Net price is the full cost of attendance minus expected grants and scholarships, and it can be much lower than the sticker price. In a [recent poll](#), the majority of students surveyed ruled out colleges based on sticker price alone.

[Adding It All Up 2012: Are College Net Price Calculators Easy to Find, Use, and Compare?](#) examines the state of net price calculators nearly a year after the federal requirement. It analyzes them from the perspective of students and families, who might not otherwise know that a college is within or beyond their financial reach. The report follows up on TICAS’ [March 2011 issue brief](#), which took an early look at colleges prepared to comply with the requirement and raised questions about ease of use, accessibility, privacy, and comparability.

“We found that, nearly a year after the federal requirement, consumers can’t count on net price calculators’ being easy to find, use, or compare,” said report author and TICAS research analyst **Diane Cheng**. “While some were easy to find and use, others were buried on college websites, had dozens of daunting questions, or generated estimates that were confusing, misleading, or unnecessarily out-of-date.”

Among the report’s key findings:

- **Easy to Find?** Nearly one-quarter of the colleges in the sample did not have a link to their calculator on their website’s financial aid or costs page. Even when the link was on a relevant page, it was often hard to find. Three of the 50 colleges in the sample had no net price calculator.
- **Easy to Use?** The number of questions asked by the calculators ranged from eight to about 70. More than one-third asked for information that students and parents would not be able to provide without digging up detailed financial records, and only four indicated whether any such questions were optional. The majority of the calculators in the sample did not tell students how their information would be used.

- **Easy to Compare?** Some colleges subtracted loans and work from the net price estimate, frequently making the resulting lower dollar figure more prominent than the required net price figure. Forty percent of calculators in the sample provided cost estimates for academic years as far back as 2008-09 and 2009-10.

“Net price calculators – done right – can help students and families see past sticker prices and understand what they might have to save, earn, or borrow to go to a particular school. But we found that it’s still too hard for consumers to tell which colleges might be affordable before they have to decide where to apply or whether to go to college at all,” said TICAS President **Lauren Asher**. “There’s a lot the Department of Education and colleges themselves can do to make these important new tools really work for all students and families.”

The report includes specific recommendations for colleges and the U.S. Department of Education to ensure that net price calculators are easier to find, use, and compare. For example, net price calculators should always:

- Be prominently posted on the financial aid and/or costs sections of college websites.
- Limit the number of detailed financial and academic questions, particularly those that are required, and make clear which questions are really required.
- Make it easy to find federally required estimates of the full cost of attendance, grant aid, and net price. The net price should always be the most prominent figure on the results page.
- If loans or student work is estimated, clearly differentiate such “self-help” from grants and scholarships and limit recommended borrowing to federal student loans.

The report urges the Department of Education to provide the guidance and enforcement necessary to ensure that colleges make their net price calculators more user friendly, so prospective students and their families can make more informed decisions about which colleges to apply to and attend.

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*An independent, nonprofit organization, The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) works to make higher education more available and affordable for people of all backgrounds. TICAS’ Project on Student Debt works to increase public understanding of rising student debt and the implications for our families, economy, and society. For more information see [ticas.org](http://ticas.org) or follow us on [Twitter](#).*