



Pennsylvania

How Pennsylvania Will Be Affected if Stafford Loan Interest Rates Double

May 2012

More than 7 million students and their families rely on federally subsidized Stafford loans to help pay for college.¹ The loans are distributed by the U.S. Department of Education and currently hold an interest rate of 3.4 percent. But that rate is set to double if Congress fails to act by July 1, 2012. If that occurs, millions of students will see their interest rates soar to 6.8 percent on the new loans they take in the next year, causing a steep rise in their loan burden and effectively increasing the cost of obtaining a college degree.

During recession, education debt increased while other credit markets dropped

Below is an excerpt from a recent column, “Student Loan Debt Seems to Rise No Matter What the Economy Does,” by Center for American Progress Senior Fellow Christian Weller.² Weller explains that education cost and debt increased during the recent recession while other forms of household debt declined. He argues that allowing student loan interest rates to rise will put additional pressures on already struggling middle-class families and make it harder for them to pay for college.

The most recent data on outstanding education loans during the Great Recession of 2007-2009 reveal that in both good and bad economic times the cost of a college education only increases, as does the debt burden of borrowers. The number of borrowers and the typical loan amount grew amid the most recent economic and financial crisis. This is especially stunning since the expansion of education debt occurred at the same time that other credit markets, especially mortgages and credit cards, contracted. Households went deeper into education debt during the crisis as other forms of credit became less prevalent.

The financial and economic crisis of those years marked a period of widespread declines in household debt levels. Mortgages and credit cards declined as households repaid their debt and banks foreclosed on bad debt. But the same was not the case for education

Voting record

On May 8, the U.S. Senate considered a motion to bring forward legislation designed to keep interest rates from doubling on July 1. Despite statements of support from both parties, the motion failed—on a party line vote of 52 to 45—to reach the 60 vote threshold needed to bring the bill to the floor.



Robert Casey
(D)
YES



Patrick Toomey
(R)
NO

loans. Education loans typically cannot be discharged in bankruptcy, which may explain why education debt didn't fall like other forms of debt did. But there are other factors at work, too. The summary data illustrate that education loan borrowers became economically less secure during the crisis because they had more debt—education and noneducation—after the crisis than before. There were also generally more households with education loans and the amount owed on education loans went up during the crisis.

More households owed education loans in 2009 than in 2007. The total share of households with education debt went from 16.2 percent in 2007 to 17.6 percent in 2009. The share of households with education loans increased for almost all groups except for Hispanics and households headed by someone without a high school degree.

The median amount owed by borrowers also grew during the Great Recession. The median education debt amount increased by \$2,573, from \$12,427 in 2007 to \$15,000 in 2009.³ And almost all groups of households saw rising education debt levels, except for households without high school degrees. The largest increase in the median education debt amount—\$5,715—occurred among African American households.

Allowing interest rates on new student loans to climb without countervailing measures will thus put additional pressures on an increasingly struggling middle class that continues to need to borrow to attend ever more costly colleges and universities.

TABLE 1
Student borrower profiles

A review of the debt characteristics of education loan recipients

Education borrower characteristics	2007	2009
Median age of borrower (in years)	35	39
Median income of borrower	\$60,704	\$66,746
Share of households with no or negative wealth	28.7%	35.6%
Median wealth of borrower	\$45,380	\$28,160
Share of borrowers who are homeowners and “under water”	2.8%	14.1%
Share with non-education debt	86.3%	86.7%
Median amount of non-education debt	\$53,851	\$62,000
Median debt payment amount on all debt	\$12,300	\$12,360

Notes: Author's calculations based on Board of Governors, Federal Reserve System (2012). Survey of Consumer Finances, Panel data from 2007 to 2009. Washington, DC: BOG. Dollar amounts are in 2009 dollars.

TABLE 2

Who's who among student loan borrowers

Borrowers by race and ethnicity, educational attainment, and size of student loans

Median loan amounts	2007	2009	Change from 2007 to 2009
Total	\$12,427	\$15,000	\$2,573
Whites	\$13,463	\$15,000	\$1,537
Blacks	\$8,285	\$14,000	\$5,715
Other races	\$12,427	\$17,000	\$4,573
Hispanic	\$13,463	\$17,000	\$3,537
No high school diploma	\$6,213	\$6,000	-\$213
High school diploma	\$6,731	\$10,000	\$3,269
Some college	\$9,942	\$11,000	\$1,058
College degree	\$19,676	\$21,000	\$1,324
Distribution of education loans			
Less than \$2000	8.4%	6.6%	-1.8%
\$2000 to \$5000	12.3%	9.6%	-2.7%
\$5000 to \$10000	22.3%	20.8%	-1.5%
\$10000 to \$25000	28.1%	30.3%	2.2%
\$25000 to \$50000	17.4%	17.9%	0.5%
\$50000 and above	11.6%	14.8%	3.2%

Notes: Author's calculations based on Board of Governors, Federal Reserve System (2012). Survey of Consumer Finances, Panel data from 2007 to 2009. Washington, DC: BOG. Dollar amounts are in 2009 dollars.

TABLE 3

Student loan households

Share of loans by race and ethnicity, and educational attainment

Share of households with education loans	2007	2009	Percentage point change from 2007 to 2009
Total	16.2%	17.6%	1.4%
Whites	15.1%	15.9%	0.8%
Blacks	24.4%	27.9%	3.4%
Other races	14.2%	16.7%	2.5%
Hispanic	15.9%	14.2%	-1.7%
No high school diploma	6.3%	5.0%	-1.3%
High school diploma	9.5%	12.0%	2.5%
Some college	19.2%	21.7%	2.5%
College degree	24.1%	24.7%	0.6%

Notes: Author's calculations based on Board of Governors, Federal Reserve System (2012). Survey of Consumer Finances, Panel data from 2007 to 2009. Washington, DC: BOG. Dollar amounts are in 2009 dollars.

The state of higher education in Pennsylvania

Allowing the interest rate on Stafford loans to double is a significant burden on those already struggling with education costs and high unemployment.

Youth unemployment rate	16.8%
High school completion rate	79.1%
College completion rate	55.3%
Change in higher education spending	-13.4%
College graduates with debt	70%
Average debt upon college graduation	\$28,599
Number of Stafford Loan borrowers	393,584
Average savings if rate unchanged (per borrower)	\$1,008
Total savings if rate unchanged (statewide)	\$396,732,672

US Department of Labor, 2010; National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2009; Complete College America, "2011 College Completion Data"; Inside Higher Ed, "State Support Slumps Again, January 23, 2012; The Institute for College Access & Success, "College InSight," 2009-10; The Project on Student Debt, The Institute for College Access & Success, "Student Debt and the Class of 2010" November 2011; The White House, accessed May 2, 2012.

How doubling Stafford interest rates will affect families in Pennsylvania

If Congress allows the interest rate to double on Stafford loans, it will impact millions of families in every state, from high school graduates to student borrowers to supporting family members. Not only is this a significant burden, it can also block young Americans' path to financial independence, forcing them to delay buying a home, starting a family, or pursuing further education. In turn, this has a detrimental effect on the economy: We need people who can make investments for the future instead of being held back by student loan debt.

Benjamin from Upper Black Eddy, Penn.

"I am a student who will be forced to search for career opportunities in a crippled economy. I am currently paying a 6 percent interest rate on over \$80,000 dollars in private loans and more than 8 percent on [some] federal loans. I haven't been able to touch the principal yet, only minor dents into the raising interest. You can clearly see how a raise to student loan interest would hinder my creating a savings account, or any shot at opening a small business."

Linda from Kintnersville, Penn.

"My son is at Temple University, which he chose due to financial considerations. My husband and I are a month shy of our 60s. We have no pensions and lost half our savings in the stock market collapse. We try to pay for his lodging and his tuition above his [federal] loans. He works to pay for his food, utilities, books, and daily living expenses.

As you can see, we are all working hard to make college affordable. He will still graduate with well over \$25,000 in debt. We still have a 15-year-old daughter. Doubling interest rates will punish a young man who is working hard to make himself employable in a financially responsible way as possible. This is in a state where the governor keeps significantly cutting funding to state universities. Needless to say, we will never retire.”

Gloria from Easton, Penn.

“My daughter will receive her BA in May. She plans to continue her education and study for a Master’s degree. She will have to take out student loans to finance her advanced degree. Doubling the interest rate will add a significant financial burden. If we want to continue to compete in the global economy, we need an educated populace. How can the richest country in the world make it more difficult to finance studies?”

Jazmin from Philadelphia, Penn.

“I started my [Master of Library and Information Science degree] in 2006, when library job prospects were good. By the time I graduated, jobs were terribly scarce. I have worked any job I could to sustain my family but it never left me enough to save or pay my loans.”

Dan from Philadelphia, Penn.

“My daughter is trying to get her nursing degree. When she finishes school she is going to be so in debt. She’s never going to have extra money to be able to purchase a home, buy a new car, have the extras that the pay from being a nurse should allow her to have.”

Barbara from Philadelphia, Penn.

“My daughter doesn’t have steady work; she’s working three part-time jobs while searching for a teaching job. She owes \$300 per month for her student loan. She is struggling to pay that now, even barring a hike in the interest rate.”

Recent in-state press coverage

“Generations of parents have worked hard to send their children to college, believing higher education is the best path to a better future. But faced with the soaring cost to obtain a college diploma, members of the so-called millennial generation, ages 18 to 34, are on track to become the first in America not to do better than their parents.”

— *“Colleges must do their part on costs,” Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/19/2012*

“As some former college students discover, paying for student loans can be a part of life long after leaving campus. ... Eighty percent of students who took out loans are late with at least one payment during the first three years—anecdotally most often the first payment.”

“Debt can saddle students for many years,” Pittsburgh Post Gazette, 3/16/12

More than 200 student body presidents who represent more than 3 million American students recently wrote to Congress,⁴ asking them to prevent the Stafford interest rates from doubling, including:

- Andrew Ferreira, Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania
- Shruti Naik, Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania
- Colin Saltry, Temple University, Pennsylvania
- Courtney Lennartz, Penn State University, Pennsylvania
- Peter Khoury, Penn State University, Pennsylvania
- David Lopez, Temple University, Pennsylvania
- Tokunbo Ashorobi, Lincoln University, Pennsylvania

Endnotes

- 1 The White House, "Keeping Student Interest Rates Low," available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/dont-double-my-rates>
- 2 Christian E. Weller, "Student Loan Debt Seems to Rise No Matter What the Economy Does" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/05/student_debt.html
- 3 The data in Table 3 showing the distribution of education loans by size also show that education loans above \$10,000 grew, while the share of education loans below \$10,000 shrank between 2007 and 2009. That is, the rise in the median loan amount was driven by rather widespread growth of education loans in the upper 60 percent of the loan distribution.
- 4 National Campus Leadership Council, "Open Letter on Student Debt," available at <http://www.nationalcampusleaders.org/debt.html>