

The Truth About Administrative Bloat At U.S. Colleges

 THE COLLEGE INVESTOR

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Key Points

- Rumors have grown in recent years that college cost increases have been driven by administrative bloat - colleges hiring more faculty and staff than needed.
- Federal datasets show student-to-staff ratios are far lower than viral claims suggest, even at Ivy League schools.
- Some confusion comes from counting hospital employees and graduate assistants as “administrators.”

In the last few years, [rising college costs \(https://thecollegeinvestor.com/73914/what-families-really-pay-for-college-out-of-pocket/\)](https://thecollegeinvestor.com/73914/what-families-really-pay-for-college-out-of-pocket/) have been at least partially blamed on a simple and provocative idea: administrative bloat.

The claim is accurate, repeat and hard to forget. Some versions suggest that elite colleges employ one administrator for every five students, or even

The claim is easy to repeat and hard to forget. Some versions suggest that elite colleges employ one administrator for every two students, or even several staff members per student. These figures have even made it to Congressional policy debates (<https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2025/06/congressional-hearing-questions-administrative-bloat-alleged-price-fixing-at-brown-ivies>), opinion pieces, and social media posts, often presented as self-evident proof that colleges have lost control of their staffing.

But when these claims are checked against federal data, they fall apart.



Using enrollment and staffing figures from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, a much different picture emerges.

Across U.S. colleges, and even at Ivy League institutions (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/46776/what-is-the-ivy-league/>), students outnumber staff by wide margins. Faculty account for a significant share of employees, and many institutions appear staff-heavy only because they operate hospitals, medical schools (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/21540/best-student-loans-pay-for-medical-school/>), or large research enterprises that serve the public far beyond their student bodies (and usually fund themselves).

Let's dive into the data and see how these rumors fall apart.

Actual Staff-Student Ratio At Ivy League Colleges

The staff to student ratio at the eight Ivy League colleges (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/53712/impact-of-ivy-plus-colleges/>) (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, UPenn, Princeton and Yale) is 60%. Put another way: **about 6 staff members for every 10 students**. If a college enrolls 10,000 students, there are 6,000 staff members.

If faculty are excluded, the ratio drops to 37%. What are non-faculty staff? This includes admissions, financial aid (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/save-and-pay-for-college/financial-aid-office-3/>), IT, libraries, student services, career services, compliance, facilities, administration, and campus safety.

The faculty and research staff represent 23% of student enrollment, consistent with an average of 5 students per faculty member. The student/staff ratio is slightly higher if one limits the enrollment count to just undergraduate student.

Based on data from [College Navigator \(https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/\)](https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/), the student/faculty ratio at the Ivy League colleges ranges from 5 to 9 students per faculty member.

What Does The National Data Show?

The [Trend Generator \(https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator/app/answer/5/30\)](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator/app/answer/5/30) tool from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) can be used to obtain national data.

Based on the Trend Generator tool, there are **a total of 4 million college staff in the U.S.**, including 1.5 million faculty. At 4-year colleges, there are a total of 3.5 million staff at 4-year colleges, of whom 1.2 million are faculty.

There are a total of **25.7 million students in college in 2023-24**, with 18.3 million at 4-year colleges. Of these, 14.2 million are undergraduate students and 4.1 million are graduate students.

So, the ratio of students to all staff (including faculty) is 6.4 at all colleges and 5.2 at 4-year colleges. If limited to just undergraduate students and faculty at 4-year colleges, the ratio is 11.8.

Where Do The Errors Come From?

The rumors appear to invert these ratios, treating the student/staff ratio as though it were a staff/student ratio.

It's also important to remember that total number of staff number can be skewed for some schools. For example, at [medical schools or colleges with university-affiliated hospitals \(https://thecollegeinvestor.com/36585/medical-residency-and-relocation-loans/\)](https://thecollegeinvestor.com/36585/medical-residency-and-relocation-loans/), total staffing numbers includes hospital employees.

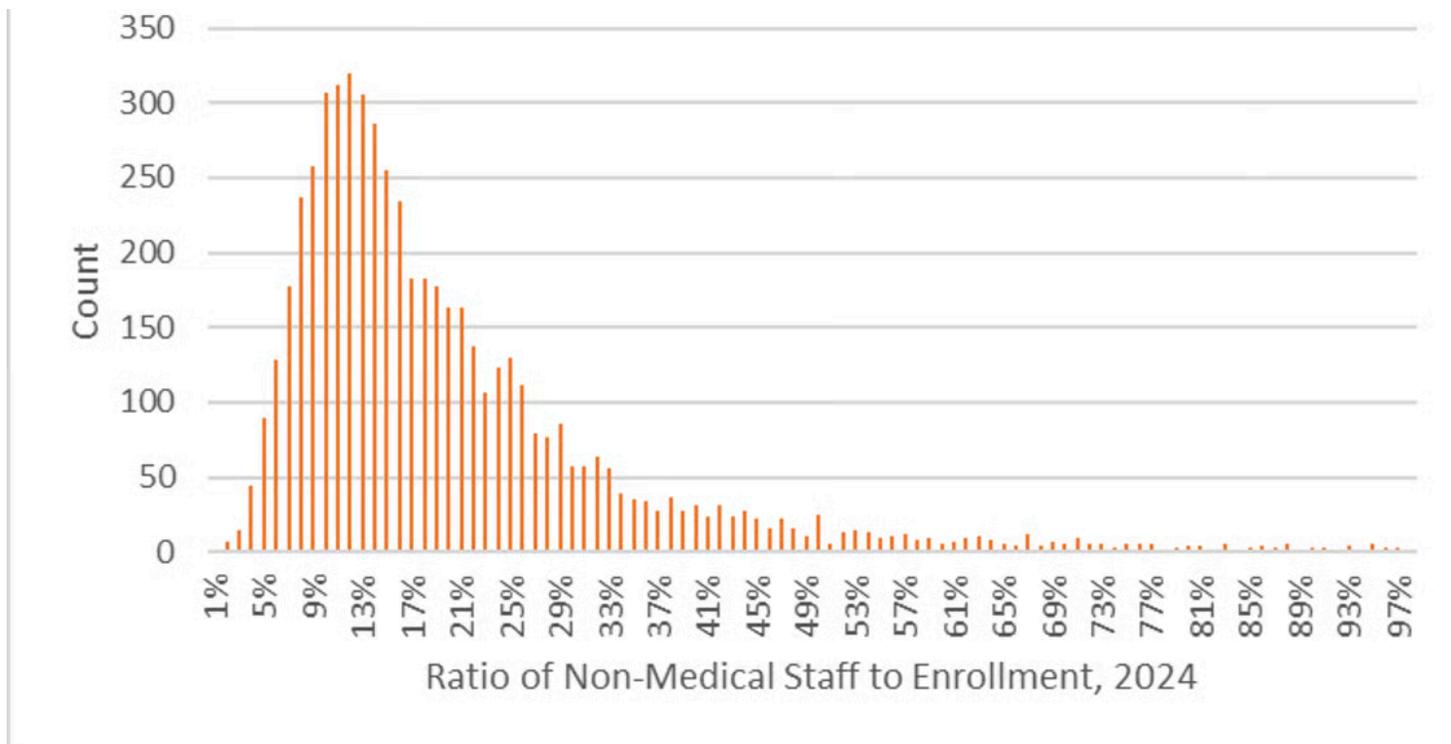
For other schools, graduate students who are working due to assistantships (a form of financial aid) are also counted in the numbers.

This can increase the staff/student ratio at specific colleges, but not to the levels highlighted in the rumors.

Using the [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDS\) \(https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/DataFiles.aspx\)](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/DataFiles.aspx), we can obtain data on individual colleges and subtract out the healthcare staff and the [graduate student \(https://thecollegeinvestor.com/21682/student-loans-graduate-school/\)](https://thecollegeinvestor.com/21682/student-loans-graduate-school/) staff. Note that some faculty have dual roles as university faculty and healthcare staff. These faculty were not subtracted.

This chart shows the ratio of staff to students in the 2024 IPEDS dataset, after subtracting healthcare staff and graduate student staff. The average ratio is 21% with a standard deviation of 15%, the median is 15% and the mode is 12%.

Ratio of Non-Medical Staff to Enrollment



The colleges with the highest staff/student ratios include medical schools and graduate student only institutions, such as:

- Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
- Weill Medical College of Cornell University
- Baylor College of Medicine
- Rockefeller University
- Oregon Health & Science University
- Medical College of Wisconsin
- UCSF
- University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center
- Albany Medical College
- University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School

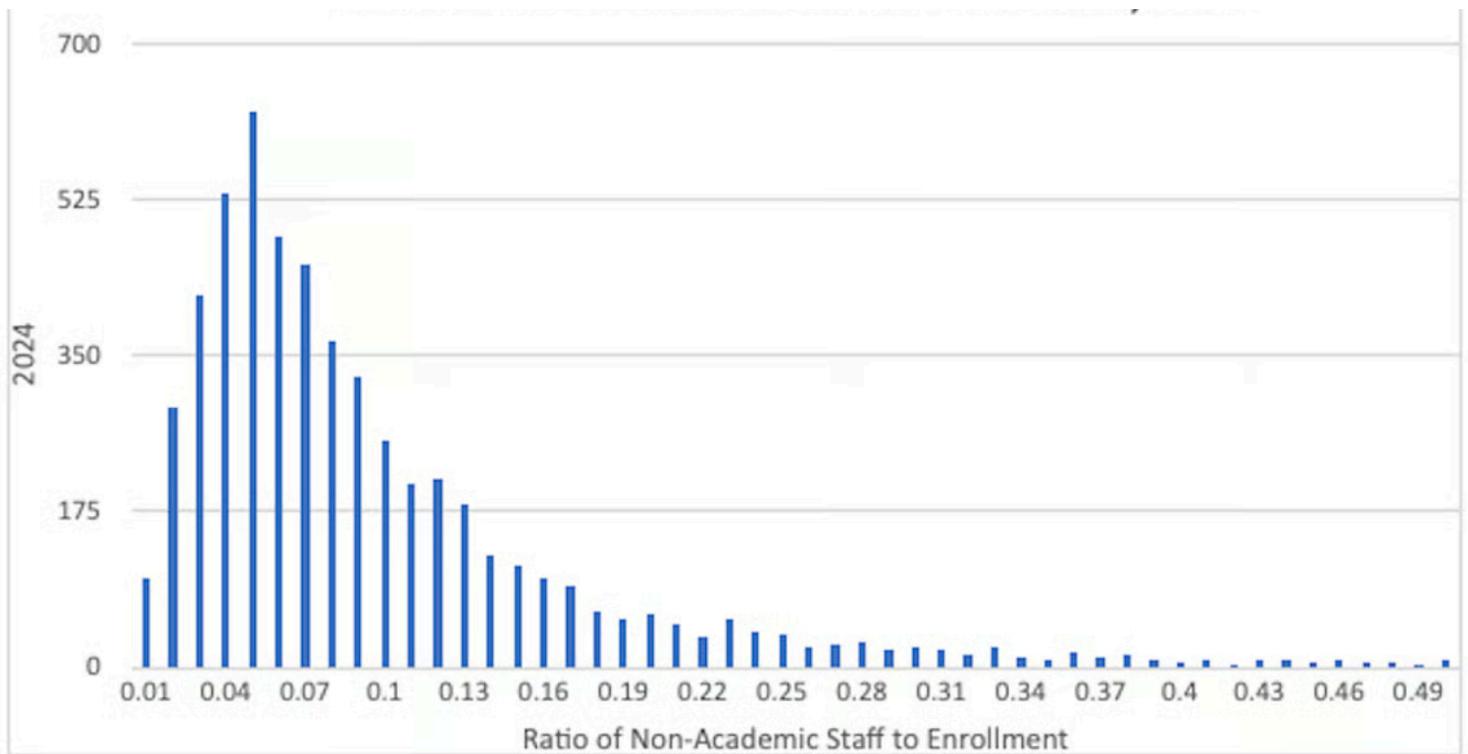
The first college that is not a medical school or graduate-student-only institution is the Curtis Institute of Music. It has a 50% staff to student ratio if limited to just non-faculty staff.

The data is consistent with non-academic staff as well. Non-academic staff includes food services, [financial aid](https://thecollegeinvestor.com/student-loan-debt/financial-aid/) (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/student-loan-debt/financial-aid/>), library services, student services, IT and facilities, administration, and campus safety.

The following chart shows a histogram of the ratio of the non-academic staff to students. The average ratio is 10% with a standard deviation of 8%, the median is 7% and the mode is 5%.

Remember, if a college enrolls 10,000 students, a 10% ratio would mean there are 1,000 non-academic staff members.

Ratio of Non-Academic Staff to Enrollment, 2024



Conclusion

Claims about administrative bloat at U.S. colleges persist because they are simple, memorable, and often repeated without context. But when enrollment and staffing data are examined carefully, those claims do not hold up.

A 60% staff-to-student ratio does not mean colleges employ more staff than students, nor does it imply a workforce dominated by administrators. It means that students still outnumber staff, and that faculty, researchers, and operational employees make up most of the count.

Much of the confusion comes from inverted ratios, misclassified employees, and the inclusion of hospital and research staff who serve functions far beyond undergraduate education. When those factors are removed, typical staff-to-student ratios drop sharply, and extreme outliers are almost entirely medical schools (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/21540/best-student-loans-pay-for-medical-school/>), or graduate-only institutions rather than traditional 4-year colleges.

This does not mean every college hires efficiently or that rising costs deserve no scrutiny. But debates about college affordability (<https://thecollegeinvestor.com/47755/college-roi-calculator/>) are better served by accurate numbers than by viral claims. Understanding what staffing ratios actually measure (and what they do not) is a necessary starting point for any serious discussion about higher education costs.

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Mark is the author of five bestselling books about scholarships and financial aid and holds seven patents. Mark serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Student Financial Aid, the editorial advisory board of Bottom Line/Personal, and is a member of the board of trustees of the Center for Excellence in Education. He previously served as a member of the board of directors of the National Scholarship Providers Association. Mark has two Bachelor's degrees in mathematics and philosophy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a Master's degree in computer science from Carnegie Mellon University (CMU).

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