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Missouri, Kansas colleges facing stiff tuition increases

By LYNN FRANEY
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Warren Crouse was so busy working at his three part-time jobs in November and December that he barely had time for school -- the reason he was working in the first place.

Crouse, a senior at Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, works to support himself and pay for college. To make matters worse, he had to put in even more hours because of a rare midyear tuition increase that raised costs by \$5 a credit hour.

Many public colleges across the country are boosting tuition -- if not now, then in the fall -- because of the sour economy. As they get less money from state governments, they are turning to students to cover the loss.

"I'm a little bit bitter," said Crouse, 26, whose grades fell last semester. "They tell you, 'It'll be this much for the year, and then in October, Whoa! It'll be different.' It irritates us, but in actuality, what are you going to be able to do about it? There's a resigned attitude."

Some Missouri public universities, including Northwest, are considering raising tuition 15 percent or more in the fall.

"When state revenues go down -- which is the hardest time for students and parents to pay because unemployment is the highest -- we sock it to students and parents," said Joni Finney, vice president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

"The statistics show we have done it in every time of recession in the 1980s and 1990s. When things are very good, we spend the state money as soon as we get it; we never plan for the future, for when the economy goes soft. Then we immediately turn to students and families to fill the gap."

In the late 1990s, when the economy roared, many public universities raised tuition by just 3 or 4 percent, still higher than the rate of inflation but a relief after previous double-digit tuition increases.

Yet state support of public higher education has steadily decreased in the past decade. That means students have gradually assumed more of the taxpayers' share of the cost of attending college, with many students taking out bigger and bigger loans to keep up with rising tuition. The average college student now graduates owing \$19,400 in student loans.

At the University of Kansas, state funding per student was almost \$6,500 in 1985 but is just \$5,800 today.

The University of Kansas is weighing the possibility of raising tuition this fall as much as 16 percent for all students, or possibly even 62 percent for freshmen only. The economy isn't totally to blame, KU administrators say; they want to raise academic quality, and the way to do that is to spend more on faculty salaries, facilities and student services.

In Missouri, higher education got about \$15 of every \$100 in the state's general revenue and lottery income in 1988. Now, it gets just less than \$13.

Shrinking state support rankles Ray Courter, vice president for finance and support services at Northwest Missouri State University. In 1984-85, the state of Missouri paid for about 72 percent of Northwest's budget, he said, but this year it is paying for about 51 percent.

Students' tuition payments now cover almost 40 percent of the budget, and about 10 percent comes from other sources such as donations, Courter said.

Courter expects the state to cover less than 50 percent of the cost of running Northwest in the next school year. He believes 50 percent is a "psychological threshold" states should not fall under.

"I perceive it as part of our general notion, not only in our state, but in society at large, that higher education deserves public support," Courter said. "Public education has been at the root of the success of our democratic society. We have not limited education to the few."

University administrators say they are choosing not to cut money from academic programs because they do not want to undo the progress they have made in academic quality, higher faculty salaries and beefed-up research programs.

So tuition must rise.

At Kansas State University, tuition may increase between 3 and 27 percent this fall, according to articles in the campus newspaper. Tom Rawson, vice president of administration and finance, would not discuss specifics, but he said tuition has historically been low and must rise if the university is to compete with other big public universities.

A similar philosophy is shared at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, which tacked on a \$6 per-credit-hour charge this spring.

"Our student leaders took a responsible position -- 'We'd rather pay a little more and get more on our investment rather than holding the line on tuition and not getting some things we need,' " said Don Aripoli, vice president for student affairs.

But he also said legislators should see higher education as an investment, not an expense. Students with college degrees most often earn more than students with high school diplomas, and thus pay more in income taxes. They also vote more and tend to get more involved with community affairs.

Plus, corporations are attracted to states with better-educated citizens, which can help the state economy.

Aripoli said Southwest Missouri State has tried to contain costs, as the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education recommended in January 1998.

For example, his office doesn't have a copier, so he and his assistants must go down the hall to make copies. The university also has put off renovating a vacant building in the middle of campus and probably will institute a "hard frost" on hiring, meaning some positions will not be filled for months.

Northwest also postponed a building renovation, took some money from reserves and delayed equipment purchases.

But Aripoli and Northwest's Courter said their universities' budgets don't have much fat to trim.

The governing Board of Curators at the four-campus University of Missouri system is considering significant tuition increases this fall but has not yet stated a range of possibilities.

"We know it's coming," said Lauren Palmer, a senior political science major at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "Our position, from the student perspective, is playing defense and trying to do what we can to keep the increase as low as possible."

Students understand that the university's budget has been hurt by the state's financial problems, said Palmer, who serves as legislative director for the Associated Students of the University of Missouri.

But at the same time, students don't have a vote on the Board of Curators and aren't allowed to help write the budget to make sure money isn't wasted.

"Students are the major investors but we have such little input into the management of that money," she said. "A tuition increase would be easier to swallow if we had a greater say on the allocation of that money. We don't even know a lot about where the money goes."

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