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Certain Degrees Now Cost More at Public Universities

By JONATHAN D. GLATER

Correction Appended

Should an undergraduate studying business pay more than one studying psychology? Should a journalism degree cost more than one in literature? More and more public universities, confronting rising costs and lagging state support, have decided that the answers may be yes and yes.

Starting this fall, juniors and seniors pursuing an undergraduate major in the business school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, will pay $500 more each semester than classmates. The University of Nebraska last year began charging engineering students a $40 premium for each hour of class credit. And Arizona State University this fall will phase in for upperclassmen in the journalism school a $250 per semester charge above the basic $2,411 tuition for in-state students.

Such moves are being driven by the high salaries commanded by professors in certain fields, the expense of specialized equipment and the difficulties of getting state legislatures to approve general tuition increases, university officials say.

“It is something of a trend,” said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Even as they embrace such pricing, many officials acknowledge they are queasy about a practice that appears to value one discipline over another or that could result in lower-income students clustering in less expensive fields.

“This is not the preferred way to do this,” said Patrick V. Farrell, provost at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. “If we were able to raise resources uniformly across the campus, that would be a preferred move. But with our current situation, it doesn’t seem to us that that’s possible.”

At the University of Kansas, which started charging different prices in the early 1990s, there are signs that the higher cost of majoring in certain subjects is affecting the choices of poorer students.

“We are seeing at this point purely anecdotal evidence,” said Richard W. Lariviere, provost and executive vice chancellor at the university. “The price sensitivity of poor students is causing them to forgo majoring, for example, in business or engineering, and rather sticking with something like history.”

Private universities do not face the same tuition constraints and for the most part are avoiding the practice, educators say, holding to the traditional idea that college students should be encouraged to get a well-rounded education.
Richard Fass, vice president for planning at Pomona, a private liberal arts college in California, said educators there considered it fundamental for students to feel part of the larger college, not segmented by differential costs. “The entire curriculum is by design available to all students,” he said.

Some public university officials say they worry that students who are charged more for their major will stick to the courses in their field to feel that they are getting their money’s worth.

“I want students in the College of Engineering at Iowa State to take courses in the humanities and to take courses in the social sciences,” said Mark J. Kushner, the dean of that college. To address problems like climate change, Mr. Kushner said, graduates will need to understand much more than technology. “That’s sociology, that’s economics, that’s politics, that’s public policy.”

Undergraduate juniors and seniors in the engineering school at Iowa State last year began paying about $500 more annually, he said, and the size of that additional payment is scheduled to rise by $500 a year for at least the next two years.

Mr. Kushner said he thought society was no longer looking at higher education as a common good but rather as a way for individuals to increase their earning power.

“There was a time, not that long ago, 10 to 15 years ago, that the vast majority of the cost of education at public universities was borne by the state, and that was why tuition was so low,” he said. “That was based on the premise that the education of an individual is a public good, that individuals go out and become schoolteachers and businessmen and doctors and lawyers, that makes society better. That’s no longer the perception.”

Neither the State University of New York nor the Connecticut State University System use differential pricing, officials say. New Jersey, however, has done so for years, according to Greg Trevor, senior director of media relations for Rutgers. In the new school year, in-state undergraduates in the general program will pay tuition of $8,541, but engineering and pharmacy students will pay $9,484.80 and business students will pay $8,716.

Various universities have adopted different versions of differential pricing to try to fight the unintended consequences it may create. Colleges that charge higher tuition for a major like business, engineering or journalism generally allow students outside the field to take some courses in the subject without paying more.

“We do try to encourage crossing disciplines, to get a feel for the world,” said Randy Kangas, assistant vice president for planning and budgeting at the University of Illinois, where students studying business, chemistry and the life sciences pay higher tuition.

Most universities with differential tuition use some of the money — 20 to 25 percent — for additional financial aid to offset some of the impact.

Officials at universities that have recently implemented higher tuition for specific majors say students have supported the move.

Students in the business school at the University of Wisconsin, for example, got behind the program because
they believed that it would support things like a top-notch faculty. “It’s very important to all the students in the business school to sustain our reputation,” said Jesse C. Siegelman, 21, who expects to graduate in December 2008.

Mr. Siegelman said representatives of 26 of 28 student groups that belong to the school’s Undergraduate Student Leadership Council, of which he was president last year, voted to support the tuition proposal.

In engineering programs, the additional money often goes toward costly laboratory equipment, because students and the companies that will employ them expect graduates to be able to go to work immediately using state of the art tools, said Mr. Lariviere of the University of Kansas.

“In many instances,” he said, “industry itself is demanding this.”

And in business schools, professors’ salaries have risen, with some schools paying starting professors $130,000 or more, said G. Dan Parker III, associate executive vice president of Texas A&M, which he said was considering whether to charge higher tuition to undergraduate students studying business.

“The salaries we pay for entering assistant professors on average is probably larger than the average salary for full professors at the university,” Mr. Parker said of business professors. “That’s how far the pendulum has swung at the business schools, and I sure wish they’d fix it.”

While several university officials said students in majors that carried higher costs could bear the burden because they would be better paid after graduation, Mr. Lariviere said he was skeptical of that rationale. He pointed out that many people change jobs several times over a career and that a major is a poor predictor of lifetime income.

“Where we have gone astray culturally,” he said, “is that we have focused almost exclusively on starting salary as an indicator of life earnings and also of the value of the particular major.”

Correction: August 3, 2007

A chart on Sunday with a front-page article about universities that charge different tuitions for different majors misstated the undergraduate division at Iowa State University that charges more than other programs. It is the College of Engineering, not the business school.