

Tuition could rise steeply in fall, colleges say

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Students at some state universities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey are bracing for the possibility of double-digit tuition increases for the next academic year, as both states struggle with growing budget deficits.

The increases would be the largest in more than a decade for some schools, including Pennsylvania State University, and would come on the heels of similarly steep tuition increases that students absorbed this year.

The sharp rise in tuition both regionally and beyond accelerates a national trend, as the burden of paying for a public college education shifts away from taxpayers and toward students.

Under Gov. Schweiker's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year, Penn State, Temple University and Lincoln University would face a 5 percent cutback in state aid.

West Chester, Cheyney and Pennsylvania's 12 other state-run universities would face a 3 percent cut - their first cut since 1992, when the state was similarly in recession.

Temple president David Adamany said the universities already had been paring expenses because 3 percent of the money they were to receive from the state for the current year was rescinded - \$5.5 million for Temple, \$10 million for Penn State.

The moves came as Schweiker tried to counter a projected state budget shortfall of more than \$620 million for the current year.

"We can't squeeze and save money now to deal with next year, because we're already dealing with a series of events that have brought economic hardship," Adamany said.

Rutgers University is facing a similar dilemma, as Gov. McGreevey grapples with a \$3 billion budget deficit this year. He already has ordered a 5 percent cut in Rutgers' aid for the current year - \$23.5 million - forcing the university to hold off on new hires and some maintenance and construction. McGreevey has not yet put forward a budget plan for the coming year, but he faces a projected \$6 billion shortfall. Rutgers officials are bracing for further cuts.

Penn State president Graham Spanier told legislators last month that the proposed cutbacks could force a 10 percent increase in tuition.

For students attending the flagship University Park campus, a 10 percent increase would mean \$705 more a year - on top of the \$508 increase that students absorbed this year. That raised the annual tuition to \$7,054.

A 10 percent rise at Temple would mean a \$732 increase, on top of the 5.5 percent increase in tuition and fees students dealt with this year. Temple's tuition is now \$7,324.

The 14 state universities - including West Chester and Cheyney - said they had planned on a 4 percent increase, not counting the state cutbacks.

The proposed cut in state aid amounts to a small fraction of operating revenue for the Pennsylvania schools. For instance, the \$12.5 million that Penn State would lose could be offset by a mere 2 percent increase in tuition.

But even without the state cut, Spanier had planned a steep tuition increase of 8 percent to help cover the skyrocketing health-care and energy costs, as well as increased insurance costs expected as a result of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Penn State also faces a \$10 million increase in malpractice insurance for its medical-school faculty.

And university spokesman Bill Mahon said Spanier wants to give faculty salary increases of 3 to 4 percent.

Mahon said the university could freeze salaries to reduce the tuition increases, but the school already lags behind other Big Ten institutions in faculty compensation.

"We could freeze salaries - at the cost of being able to recruit and retain good faculty," Mahon said. "We can't ignore faculty salaries any more than we can the lighting bills. The faculty are the heart of an institution and what its reputation is built on."

The state universities, as well as Temple, have unionized faculty, so salary increases already are set at those schools.

The state cuts would exacerbate a trend public universities have faced for years.

As state aid fails to keep pace with cost increases, tuition shoulders a greater burden.

Back in 1970, state aid covered 62 percent of Penn State's operating expenses, with tuition covering 32 percent.

Today, the numbers are reversed.

Similarly, state aid provided 60 percent of Temple's operating revenue in 1972-73 but covers only 36 percent today.

The increased reliance on tuition isn't simply the result of the schools' indiscriminately spending more per student. Penn State officials say that, adjusted for inflation, they spend virtually the same on each student today as they did in 1970.

The phenomenon is not unique to Pennsylvania schools.

Across the country, state appropriations for public four-year colleges represented 40 percent of schools' revenues in 1989.

But by 1999, states contributed only 31.5 percent, according to U.S. Department of Education data.

The shift has come primarily because the states themselves have been faced with increasing costs in other areas - from Medicaid to prison construction.

This year, they also are facing reduced tax revenue because of the recession.

Adamany did offer a glimmer of hope.

The state doesn't complete its budget until it sees more recent tax-revenue projections than those on which Schweiker based his proposed spending plan.

With the economy showing the beginnings of a turnaround, the newer numbers might give lawmakers reason to reduce or eliminate the cuts Schweiker has proposed.

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