



## States tighten squeeze on student wallets

By Donna Harrington-Lueker

September 3, 2003

Matt Murray, a senior at the University of California, Berkeley, knows when the numbers don't stack up in a student's favor. Faced with a \$248 million shortfall in state funding, the Board of Regents for the eight-campus University of California system raised the cost of attendance 40% over the rates paid a year ago, while cutting the overall budget by 10% and student services by 20%.

"It means students are going to pay more and get less," says Murray, an architecture major who is on the board. Among the changes this fall: cuts in research programs, library hours and health and counseling services; salary freezes; fewer outreach programs to prepare K-12 students for college careers; and, in Murray's view, longer lines outside advisers' offices.

Students and faculty also face uncertainty. This year, financial aid covers the difference for students whose families earn less than \$60,000 a year, limiting the damage of this year's double-digit increases. But next year? Unless the state's economy rebounds, no one knows what safety net might remain.

Officials are even discussing the possibility of freezing enrollments, a move some say breaks trust with the bumper crop of potential first-year students now making their way through the state's high schools. (For the past 43 years, the state has promised entrance to the top 12.5% of its high school seniors and has never had to turn a qualified student away for lack of space.)

Similar scenarios are playing out at public colleges and universities across the country. What's at stake is more than the inconvenience of a lengthy wait to talk to an academic adviser.

Nationwide, 80% of college students attend public colleges and universities. In California, 87% do. But as states cut back on funding and schools respond with reduced services and sharp tuition hikes, the public compact that recognizes access to higher education as a priority — a compact dating back to the 1860s — is getting lost.

The rate increases at many schools are dramatic. According to the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, the University of Arizona raised tuition 39% this year, the result of a \$26 million cut in state funds. There have been layoffs and a hiring freeze. Programs have been eliminated, reorganized or merged. After similar cost controls and a 5% mid-year tuition increase in many of its schools last year, the University of Maryland system upped tuition again by 13% this fall.

Larger class sizes and fewer new faculty members have helped the University of Iowa reduce its costs, but students still face a stiff increase of 19% in tuition this year. The list goes on: Kansas State and the University of Kansas (18%); the City University of New York (25%); the University of Oklahoma (28%); Indiana University (23% for new students).

Among the hardest hit: the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the state's flagship campus. Officials have cut nearly 30% from the budget over the past three years while raising student fees and tuition by about the same percentage to \$7,482 for in-state residents. Another \$750 increase in fees is set for this spring.

In other countries, such increases would result in "absolute public outrage," says Lara Couturier, associate

director of the Futures Project, a higher-education think tank at Brown University. But here, "we just seem willing to let the individual shoulder the burden of the cost."

To be fair, even with double-digit increases, public colleges remain affordable compared with their private counterparts. The average tuition for a private, four-year school in 2002-03 was \$18,273, according to the College Board, vs. \$4,081 for a four-year public institution.

For some upper middle-class or professional families whose children attend flagship universities, even a 40% jump will be more of an annoyance than a burden: one less vacation, a home-equity loan, more competition for fewer (but larger) classes, more dorm roommates. But for others, the cumulative effect will be significant: longer hours working outside the classroom, longer times to complete a degree and bigger debt loads after graduation.

For low-income families, the hikes could thwart already-tenuous college plans. "They'll hear about tuition going up another \$500, and that's just one more piece of evidence that college isn't for people like them," says Pat Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Families are even more likely to draw that conclusion during tough economic times like today's. Callan is familiar with the pattern. Over the years, the economy that guts state budgets takes the same toll on personal incomes. Result: "When people can least afford it, we shift the costs back to them and cut back on financial aid," Callan says.

The public view of who should pay for a higher education also seems to be shifting. In the past, the tradition was that one generation paid for the cost of the next, Callan says. But today the mantra is that adversity builds character and that having students borrow enormous amounts against their future is perfectly OK.

"We need a long-term set of policies about what's a fair share to pay, about how much debt is acceptable, and about how much financial aid should be available," Callan says.

Until then, the states will continue to cut higher education budgets because they can, universities will continue to raise tuition and the cost of financing a higher education will increasingly become a private gamble rather than a public investment.

"As things are now, one generation skates through and the next gets clobbered," says Callan. "That cycle has to be broken."

*Donna Harrington-Lueker is a freelance education writer in Bristol, R.I., and a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.*

