

A tuition hike and a message

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UT campuses stagger rates to encourage full-time courseloads

By JAMES M. O'NEILL

The University of Texas campuses at Austin, Dallas and Arlington will impose steep tuition increases for the fall that are designed to send a message to students who linger: It was nice to have you, but it's time to move on.

By structuring tuition hikes of up to 25 percent for part-time students, those UT campuses hope to push more students into full-time courseloads so they can graduate sooner.

UT System officials say this will help reduce the cost of college for students in the long term. It also will free up much-needed slots on those campuses to address the growing numbers of college-ready students statewide who are coming through the pipeline, they say.

Under a tuition plan approved Tuesday by the University of Texas System Board of Regents, an undergraduate student at UT-Dallas who takes a part-time load of six credits per semester will see tuition and fees jump by 25 percent, or \$387, to \$1,925.

A student taking a full-time load of 15 credits, by comparison, will pay \$3,665 – only \$249 more than currently, or 7.2 percent. UT-Dallas will also freeze its tuition rate at \$3,665 no matter how many credits a student takes beyond 15 – making it a bargain to take more courses than fewer.

Creating a roadblock?

But higher education experts and some students worry that increasing tuition more sharply for part-timers might create an unintended barrier for the very students the UT System has said it wants to serve more – lower-income minorities, particularly

Hispanics, who often must work to pay for college and therefore have no choice but to attend part time.

A typical course in the UT System is worth three credits, and a full-time load is 12 to 15 credits per semester, depending on the school.

At UT-Arlington, an undergraduate who takes six credits will see a 19 percent increase in tuition and fees in the fall, or \$244, while a student taking 15 credits will see an 8.3 percent jump, or \$245.

UT-Arlington President Jim Spaniolo said that other discounts could make the tuition hike for full-time students virtually disappear. Those who take 14 credits per semester for two semesters and maintain a 2.5 grade-point-average, for instance, would get a \$500 rebate.

The system of higher rates for part-timers "does make it more expensive for students who need to work and therefore can't take a full course load," said Basheer Benhalim, 22, student government president at UT-Dallas.

"We have to find a way to ensure the changes don't price them out of a college education," he said. Providing a combination of grants instead of loans and increasing the number of classes at night or on weekends might help lower-income students carry a heavier courseload each semester.

"When people drop out or attend part time, it's usually an economic issue because the cost is more than they can bear," Mr. Benhalim said.

UT-Dallas provost Hobson Wildenthal agreed that structuring tuition increases to encourage more full-time attendance without scaring off lower-income students is a delicate balancing act.

"It is definitely a conflict," he said. "Some students are very resistant to increase their debt."

Concern about part-time students – particularly those from low-income families who must work while in school – taking on debt has grown in recent years. Adding to those concerns is how federal financial aid policy over the last decade shifted away from grants toward loans.

To address that issue, UT-Austin, which also has a tuition rate that is higher per credit hour for part-timers, has protected lower- and middle-income students from the bulk of the tuition increases:

- Students from families making \$40,000 or less will not pay any tuition increase at UT-Austin.
- Students from families making between \$40,000 and \$60,000 will pay 25 percent of the increase.
- And students from families making between \$60,000 and \$80,000 will pay half the increase.

UT System Chancellor Mark G. Yudof said that most low-income students, even those attending part time, won't feel the pinch of tuition increases. He pointed to federal programs such as Pell grants and the fact that more than 20 percent of new tuition revenue at the system's nine campuses goes to financial aid.

UT-Dallas President David E. Daniel said the sharp rise in part-time tuition on his campus was aimed primarily at students who are close to full-time status but are stretching out their courseloads in what has become "culturally embedded" behavior on campus.

UT-Dallas started the more expensive tuition rates for part-timers a year ago, combined with flat rates for those taking any number of credits above 15. Since

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then, the number of undergraduates taking 15 credit hours in a semester has more than doubled, he said.

"That's a benefit for them, because they will graduate sooner, enter the workforce and start earning higher income sooner," Dr. Daniel said.

Two-year tuition plan

For the first time, the UT System regents Tuesday also approved tuition rates for two successive academic years, in order to give students and their families a chance to better predict costs. Students had requested the two-year tuition plan.

At UT-Austin, the increases are far higher the first year than the second. The jumps in tuition for full-time undergraduate students at UT-Austin vary by major. Liberal arts students will pay \$3,815 per semester, an increase of 9.4 percent, or \$329. Of that,

\$150 will cover higher energy costs.

The increase for the 2007-08 fall semester will be more modest – \$20 per semester, or a half-percent.

The tuition hikes at nine UT System campuses approved Tuesday are only partly designed to influence student behavior. Most of the increases are the result of a number of economic pressures facing public universities in Texas and across the country. Some examples:

- Chancellor Yudof noted that over the last 20 years, state appropriations have become a smaller portion of the system's revenue stream. While overall state appropriations have increased, they have not risen as fast as inflation or enough to address the booming growth in student enrollment.

UT-Arlington has seen full-time

equivalent enrollment rise by 26 percent since the 2002-03 academic year. UT-Dallas has seen a 31 percent enrollment increase in that time, and other campuses have seen even higher growth.

- The changing nature of higher education itself is sending costs higher, Dr. Yudof said. He noted that the growing focus on science and technology means infrastructure costs that far exceed past levels.

Also, he said, growing competition from the private sector for quality professors is forcing universities to pay more to lure and keep their faculty stars.

- Several campuses are adding fees – such as the \$150 levy at UT-Austin – to cover higher energy costs. UT-Dallas also plans to impose a \$150 energy fee