

Reinvestment plan would put college tuition in deep freeze

Washington's public four-year universities are asking the Legislature to bolster sagging state investment in higher education in order to freeze resident undergraduate tuition for the first time in a quarter century.

"This is a bold initiative that creates greater opportunities for middle class families and is an investment that will be returned many times over in growing our state's economy," said Bruce Shepard, President of Western Washington University and chair of the Council of Presidents.

Even as total funding per student has remained flat over two decades, state budget reductions of more than 40 percent in the past four years and corresponding double digit tuition increases have shifted the burden of those costs to students and their families. The state picked up 71 percent of those costs in 2000 system-wide. Today, students and their families cover 67 percent through tuition.

The Legislature stopped the trend when it approved a "no new cuts" budget for higher education last spring. The universities' proposal would actually reverse it and begin to restore balance. In exchange for \$225 million in state reinvestment in the 2013-15 operating budget, the schools would hold resident undergraduate tuition at current rates for the next two years. That hasn't occurred since 1986.

"ASWSU is very excited to see a proposal of this scale coming from the Council of Presidents," said Tristan Hanon, Director of Legislative Affairs for the Associated Students of Washington State University. "The trend of disinvestment in higher education has caused students and families to be priced out of a quality education, and this proposal provides a way to restore quality and affordability to our colleges and universities."

"As a Regent, I've seen first hand how difficult this recession has been on our students and families," said Joanne Harrell a member of the University of Washington Board of Regents. "This proposal is a win-win. It makes higher education more affordable and ensures our students have access to the high quality education they deserve."

Though reinvestments would vary at each campus to reflect individual missions, the package would collectively increase overall enrollments, reinvest in the quality of education and student services, increase production of high demand degrees sought by employers and meet performance goals set by the Legislature in 2011.

"It's time," said Dave Rawlinson, a faculty member at Central Washington University. "This plan delivers a double dose of affordability by holding the line on tuition and providing students the resources they need to graduate on time."

The proposal would save money, too. Freezing resident undergraduate tuition for

two years would avoid new costs otherwise required to allow Washington's State Need Grant program to keep pace with growing tuition. Consecutive tuition increases at the historical average of 7 percent would require a \$35 million increase in State Need Grant funding to maintain benefits to students.

Washington's five public universities and one college are operating on state appropriations that are roughly equal to funding levels last seen during the 1989-91 budget cycle. The state ranks last in the nation in per student funding.

Despite that, the schools are educating 33,000 more students than they were in 1989 and still rank in the top five nationally in graduation rates and degree production efficiency.

"Our higher education system has performed exceedingly well under incredible duress," said Ralph Murphy, a faculty member at The Evergreen State College. "This plan would help us improve even more and allow us to extend our reach to more Washington students."

"Better access, better affordability, better quality and more graduates in ready-to-hire fields," said Rodolfo Arévalo, President at Eastern Washington University. "That's what this plan is about."

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