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Soaring college tuition prompts political response

by Robert Dodge
The Dallas Morning News

The cost of a college education, which has risen steadily for a decade, soared for the 2003-04 school year. And now, it is becoming a political issue.

A new report issued Tuesday showed that average tuition and fees at four-year public colleges rose 14 percent, to \$4,694. Similarly, costs at two-year public schools rose 13.8 percent, to \$1,095.

And at private universities, where costs run higher, prices rose 6 percent, to \$19,710.

The College Board, an association of colleges and universities that issued the report, blamed the economy and a shortfall of federal and state revenues. The group said many students have been protected from tuition hikes by the growing availability of financial aid.

Even so, the latest figures took on a political charge as Republicans accused colleges and universities of wasting taxpayer funds on lavish campus facilities. Among those cited were large hot tubs, sunbathing decks and massage facilities, as well as a rock-climbing wall at a recreation center at the University of Houston.

Elwyn Lee, vice president for student affairs at the University of Houston, objected to his school's 264,000-square-foot, \$53 million recreation center being used as an example of college largesse. He said the facility was built at student request and is being financed with a \$75-a-semester fee.

"There are no massage parlors. There are no pedicure places in our facility," Lee said. "Some people are speaking and letting their enthusiasm get away from them."

But Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, said colleges and universities have not been held accountable for such spending.

"Hyperinflation in college costs has been pummeling parents and students for more than a decade, and the problem has not been a lack of spending by states or the federal government," he said.

"The bigger issue is whether institutions are accountable enough to parents, students and taxpayers, and clearly they are not."

College Board officials said schools have taken steps to tighten their belts as the recession shrunk tax revenues. While they were reluctant to forecast future trends, they noted that college tuition and fees also had escalated during earlier recessions.

"It is a problem, (but) it is not an unprecedented problem," said Sandy Baum, an economics professor at Skidmore College, who wrote the board's annual "Trends in College Pricing."

In blaming the trend on tax revenue shortfalls, university officials tapped into Republican angst about being accused of under-funding public education in advance of next year's presidential election. Democrats

used the report to accuse Republicans of draining education coffers to pay for President Bush's tax cuts.

"Republican tax and budget cuts have hurt students by forcing states to raise tuition," said Rep. George Miller of California, the ranking Democrat on the House education committee.

Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, warned against initiatives that would limit the ability of institutions to freely set tuition and fees. But Boehner has praised a bill introduced by Rep. Buck McKeon, R-Calif., that would allow the federal government to cut off federal subsidies to institutions that repeatedly impose "exorbitant" tuition increases.

Daniel Langan, an Education Department spokesman, said the Bush administration would take a serious look at McKeon's proposal. And he accused critics of using "inflammatory rhetoric," noting the administration's 2004 budget would boost funds for grants, loans and work-study opportunities by \$2.8 billion.

The College Board report showed that during the last decade, tuition and fees rose 47 percent on an inflation-adjusted basis at four-year public universities and 22 percent at two-year public schools. Cost at private universities rose 42 percent.

Despite the increases, college officials said they are struggling.

"All of us need to focus on the mounting and troubling hardships of financing an education," said Caperton, who is a former Democratic governor of West Virginia.

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, said reduced earnings on endowments and fewer financial gifts by alumni and corporations also contributed to funding shortages.

"We are in the middle of a very difficult period in financing higher education," he said.

College Board officials said that a dip in room and board costs at both public and private schools helped moderate the tuition hikes.

They also said the effects of tuition and fee hikes were less burdensome on student pocketbooks because almost 60 percent of undergraduates receive financial aid. They said financial aid has been rising to further soften the blow.

Statistics for student aid are a year behind tuition and fees.

During the 2002-03 school year, total financial aid rose to \$105 billion, up 14.5 percent over the previous year. And during the past decade, financial aid rose 203 percent, up from \$34 billion in the 1992-93 academic year.

College Board officials said that financial aid left the "average student" well positioned to absorb increased costs. But they acknowledged that 40 percent of students receive no aid and have to shoulder the additional expense.

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