

Prompt

Should college tuitions and costs be changed? If so, how and if not why not?

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University students today have it pretty good. At decent-sized schools, students have access to any number of low-cost services that civilians would donate organs for. We get gyms and fitness centers for free or close to it. We have computer labs, lounges and more clubs and societies arriving every semester. With little or no fees, on-campus coffee bars and pick-up basketball games make traveling into the real world increasingly ludicrous. Sure, we pay more in tuition rates to help offset the cost, but college students these days shouldn't sweat the bill's bundled-in activity fees - it's simply worth it to fork over a little extra cash for the added convenience. Besides, with college rates continually on the rise, these resource charges amount to a drop in a very large bucket. On the other hand, shouldn't a University provide for its students without bleeding them dry? After all, without the learners, the educators and administrators would be jobless.

So why should students pay for access to increasingly basic and common services? Students have come to expect these tasty perks, as if our Universities owe us for passing through their hallowed halls. But have we come to expect too much? Do we truly deserve extravagant bonuses? My own school has for years given students free, unlimited, high-speed access to the Internet. All rooms in all dorms have long had an Ethernet port, intended to help us with our studies. Any student can plug in, call up the library's extensive database subscriptions, and hunt for journals, articles and other information on a boundless range of topics.

Of course, with such power comes responsibility, for students can also visit the seedier and less, shall we say, academic nooks of the World Wide Web. In light of this, UMD began cracking down on Internet access and Networking capabilities on campus last year. First, the students' file-sharing capabilities were restricted. Many students grumbled, but the administration remained firm. Most recently, filters blocked the transfer of certain controversial file types. Student outcry led to a scaled-back version of the sentinel software, but the students haven't finished crusading. The school, they say, has infringed on our rights by installing restrictive programs between the Internet and us. University literature promises "free, unlimited" Internet access, and that's true, provided one doesn't read the fine print about restricted file types and such.

But what about the school's viewpoint? The administrators point to the massive drain on resources stemming from the wired undergraduates' decidedly un-studious activities. Supposedly reserved for academics and research, Internet lines clog with data-cholesterol like my arteries after a chili-cheese-dog binge. While students howl for more bandwidth, those in charge could point out that we'd have all we need if we would just quit swapping megabytes with like-minded Internet denizens. Besides, more bandwidth costs money, a charge that would necessarily pass to students, who aren't known for accepting rate hikes gracefully. Debates like this fuel complaints from students about the inability of modern universities to meet their customers' needs. Many point to regulated, government-run higher education institutions such as Australia's, in which students pay little if any up-front tuition fees, as models America should follow.

The truth, however, is that these "free" education systems often gloss over the hidden charges they pass to students. At the University of Sydney, Australia, full-time students can opt to pay almost nothing to attend classes - the school deducts the state-subsidized tuition from wages or taxes after graduation. At first the glance, the system looks perfect: no tuition fees, a large and energetic Student Union providing stores, entertainment, clubs, societies and other student activities, and a top-rate education. But look closer: students must find their own housing in real estate-strapped Sydney (not a cheap proposition any time, let alone during this hectic Olympic year) or live in the suburbs and commute up to 2 hours each way to attend lectures. Lecture halls literally overflow with students, particularly first-year requisite courses. And forget about trying to speak with administrators in your department - two hour queues mar the first several weeks of school as understaffed departments struggle to reconcile students' scheduling and curriculum woes.

Truthfully, governments rarely have enough money to elevate the condition of University students. The cash can only stretch so far. When it runs out, students must absorb the costs or give up some of their lifestyle's trappings. Currently, Australia's government seeks to deregulate and privatize the University system, to let them compete with each other to attract students (and their cash.) Naturally, those living under the current format have staged heated protests at every opportunity.

And in America, our colleges wrestle between chasing off students by raising tuitions, or chasing off students by offering fewer of the amenities we feel we deserve. Somehow, Universities must settle the question of what exactly they should offer their customers. With budgets stretched tight and students continually campaigning for extended privileges, conflict inevitably thrives. But at the end of the day, students attend Universities to get an education. College, unfortunately, is not a playground. If publicly funded, the bulk of a University's endowments should, must, go towards academic pursuits. Not doing so would eventually short-change the students themselves - we can have all the cheap lattes we want, but it won't help us pass those exams. And for those of us who just want to swap computer files back and forth without hassle from The Man, we could always start paying for our own Internet connections.... Or perhaps not.