Student fees skyrocket as universities look for more money

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The list of extra charges students must pay to attend Louisiana public universities grows every year. Thirteen of the state's 14 public four-year schools have increased fees by at least 100 percent over the past decade, with some hiking them by as much as 300 percent.

Though skyrocketing tuition gets more attention, fees have shot up even faster, and they now can make up roughly one-third of the overall cost of college for a typical Louisiana student.

Although no university has stayed out of the arms race in fees, some have been more aggressive than others. Since 2005, fees have ballooned by more than 340 percent at Southeastern Louisiana University, by 330 percent at Louisiana Tech and by 280 percent at McNeese State University.

The reason for the meteoric rise is simple: The state has slashed direct aid to four-year universities by more than half since 2008. Much of the resulting shortfall has been made up by steep tuition hikes.

But all tuition increases greater than 10 percent must be approved by the Legislature, whereas universities can

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THIRD IN AN EIGHT-DAY SPECIAL REPORT

TOMORROW: LSU, Louisiana's flagship university, has had to shelve ambitious plans.

AVERAGE STUDENT FEES IN LOUISIANA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Fees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>$750</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
<td>$2,180</td>
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Advocate staff photo by BILL FEIG
get away with imposing some new fees and raising existing ones without lawmakers' OK. Though the law says the Legislature must approve fee increases in the same way it votes on tuition, multiple opinions from the state Attorney General's Office have clarified that "any charges which are for services or products which are not directly a part of the delivery of an education are not considered fees."

What that means is that it's harder for universities to raise fees to improve classroom instruction. But they can — and do — assess and increase fees each year for the intangibles that draw students to campuses: flashy recreation centers with lazy rivers, swanky dorm rooms, state-of-the-art health centers. As such fancy amenities pop up at other universities, they've been wallowed by fee increases, with fee bills now amounting to thousands of dollars a year.

The growing chasm between the cost of a TOPS award and the sticker price of college frustrates James Caillier, executive director of the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students, which advocates on behalf of the scholarship program named for Taylor. He calls fee increases "an end around to get more monies."

"It's a way to get monies over and above tuition. In most states, they don't separate fees and tuition; they just call it tuition. But in Louisiana, we separate the two. So TOPS pays a certain amount, and the legislators are frustrated because the students are saying, 'I'm going to ULL and I've still got to pay $3,000? I thought I was going to school tuition-free!' Tuition, yeah — but all those fees were added on."

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The burden has become ex-cruciating for LSU sophomore DaJonna Strong, a physics major. During her freshman year, she got a stipend that has helped pay some bills but not all of them. Her father has tried to help, and she's had to take out student loans to boot.

"I don't know where to come up with this money, other than to find a job, but with my busy schedule, I don't have time for that," she said.

Some vague, some tailored

College students across the state pay two types of fees. Some are vague in description and may be used for a broad range of purposes, such as academic excellence, athletic enhancement, operations and technology.

LSU President F. King Alexander acknowledged that LSU's academic excellence fee, typically $245 per student per semester, can be used however the administration sees fit. "It's discretionary, but it's carefully directed to areas of the greatest needs," Alexander said. "Sometimes you need flexibility. One year, you might be using it for one purpose, and one year, you might be using it to keep the library open."

Other fees are earmarked for specific and often narrow student-life purposes or programs, although they are paid by all students. For instance, a student might not care about music, but he still will have to pay a few dollars each year to support the school band. Another might lack school spirit, but still will have to pay a few bucks nonetheless to underwrite cheerleaders, dance
FEE EXPLOSION

Tuition rates at Louisiana's public universities have been hiked more sharply than those in any other state since 2010. But mandatory fees at most schools have gone up even faster. Whereas fees in 2005 typically made up 22 percent of the “sticker price” of college, today they account for 29 percent — and they are not covered by TOPS scholarships.

Sources: Board of Regents, Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance

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teams and yearbooks.

Students also must pay fees that finance health centers, recreation centers and transit systems providing services that are marketed to them as free: flu shots, yoga, rides to and from class.

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The students who receive the most generous TOPS awards do get some protection from fees. Those who maintain a 3.0 GPA and get a 27 on their ACT, in addition to having their tuition covered, get an extra $800 a year that can go toward fees. But that stipend does not cover even a semester’s fees at most public four-year universities in the state.

And even students who have generous scholarships in addition to TOPS are seeing their award money stretched thinner.

Bryce Bonin, a junior at LSU majoring in biochemistry, said he had gotten used to receiving a check for $250 to $300 from the university each year from his scholarships’ leftover funds. Not this year.

“My scholarships didn’t cover everything,” he said.

This year, he owed $200 to LSU. It’s the first time in four semesters that he has had to pay a balance.

“Engineering labs are expensive; equipment is expensive; programs are expensive,” Alexander said. “Fees can help us get over those hurdles.”

At Southeastern, Domiano acknowledged that fees have risen steeply, but he noted that the school’s tuition is among the lowest in the state, helping to offset the total cost.

Still, the growth in fees has been eye-popping: An in-state, full-time undergraduate SLU student taking 12 credit hours paid $453 in fees for the 2005-06 school year. That same student would have paid $2,002 in fees this year.

The combined effect of fee hikes and tuition increases can raise students’ costs quickly.

Board of Regents data show that at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, combined tuition and fees shot up by more than 20 percent this year. That’s the biggest increase in the state.

One of UL-Lafayette’s largest recently approved fees — a charge of $7.50 per credit hour, capped at a maximum of $112.50 — is aimed at the nebulous goal of “actualizing the university’s master plan.” In defending the fee, university administrators point out that student government voted to approve it.

A student’s major also can affect how high his or her fee bill will be. At Louisiana Tech, for instance, students pay “college fees” that vary by major. Education students pay only a $5 college fee, and liberal arts students pay a $10 fee. But engineering and science students pay an extra $77 to help cover lab costs. Business administration students pay an extra $80 in program and lab fees.

The Legislature last year opened the door for more variation in how much students pay for college depending on their majors, passing a new law that lets universities create “different fees” for certain programs.

Administrators say they realize that jacking up fees can put college out of reach for some students. But it’s still a tempting way for universities to pay for programs, equipment and extras that they would struggle to afford in an era of shrinking state support.

As they continue to rise nationwide, fees are a cost that students and parents must factor in when considering how to pay for college, said Mark Kantrowitz, a financial aid expert and the founder of multiple scholarship and student aid websites.

Kantrowitz said students should calculate the net price of college by starting with the total cost of attendance — including fees — and then subtracting grants, scholarships and other aid that does not have to be repaid.

“Some families will look just at the tuition and be fooled,” he said.