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State universities, community colleges sound funding alarm

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 30, 2014



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The state budget approved by legislators today will give the University of Massachusetts system enough funding to freeze tuition and fees for a second straight year, but leaders of the state's nine other public universities and 15 community colleges said their funding allocation is likely to mean higher prices and cuts to programming and staff.

UMass asked legislators for a funding increase of \$40 million; community colleges sought a \$20 million boost, and state universities requested an additional \$15 million.

UMass is poised to receive what it has requested and its trustee board has already voted to freeze tuition and fees next year.

But the community colleges and state universities are each in line to get about \$7 million less than what they asked for.

Administrators said that under the state funding plan, students at state universities and community colleges will likely see their bill rise as much as several hundred dollars.

The disparity between support for the five-campus UMass system and the other public higher education institutions has drawn sharp criticism from campus presidents and other advocates. They say it further burden students at schools that typically draw larger numbers of the state's high school graduates, often from poorer families.

"I'm outraged," Bridgewater State University President Dana Mohler-Faria said in an interview as the final budget plans were taking shape. "What in essence the legislature is saying is, 'We're going to support the students who go to UMass but not the students who are more needy who go to our state universities and community colleges.'"

"That's grossly unfair, and it flies in the face of what public higher education stands for," added Mohler-Faria.

Bridgewater charges \$7,923 a year for in-state undergraduates taking 15 credits per semester and attending daytime classes. Mohler-Faria said the school may increase the cost by up to \$300 a year.

Community college students account for 47 percent of public enrollment in Massachusetts, while state university students make up 24.5 percent. UMass students account for 28.5 percent.

State university and community college presidents were thankful for the boost legislators gave them a year



ago and for the additional funding they are poised to receive in the coming fiscal year. They also said they are happy UMass appears set to get its funding.

“What I’m unhappy with is the inequity,” Fitchburg State University president Robert V. Antonucci said. “If they can do it for them, why not for us. Our students have as much of a right to a quality education.”

He and other campus leaders pointed out that state universities and community colleges are already at a financial disadvantage compared to UMass, including having fewer revenue sources from research, alumni, and other areas.

Yet community colleges and state universities typically teach students from poorer families.

“Many of our students are right on the edge,” Mohler-Faria said. “Many are working two or three jobs to make ends meet. It could be the straw that breaks the camel’s back for them.”

Senator Michael O. Moore, a Millbury Democrat who chairs the joint higher education committee, pointed out that community college and state university tuition and fees are still drastically lower than their private counterparts.

And, “I’m pleased we gave them the additional funding we did give,” he said this afternoon. “I wished there was more funding available. But it is a significant amount.”

The budget for the next fiscal year, which starts tomorrow, will now go before Governor Deval Patrick for final approval. He has 10 days to approve, veto, or propose changes.

Noah Berger, president of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, said maintaining the affordability that community colleges and state universities provide is important to building the state’s workforce.

“Tuition and fee increases are dangerous potentially for the future of the state economy,” he said recently. “More so than many other states, we depend on a well-educated workforce to drive the state economy.”

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