

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. ..."
— The First Amendment

THURSDAY October 27, 2011

WWW.SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM

EDITORIAL BOARD

DON MILLER: Editor

MIKE BLAESSER: Internet Director

CEIL CIRILLO: Community Member

AS WE SEE IT

High cost of higher ed

Occupy protesters decry tuition hikes, but colleges see no alternative

The growing debate about the Occupy movement shouldn't obscure meaningful issues the movement has raised.

The police action, for instance, against Occupy Wall Street. Oakland has become a battleground. City officials and law enforcement have grown increasingly concerned that in addition to protesters making their arguments about big banks and the financial sector, along with the rights of state prisoners, the Oakland scene has become a host-all encampment for transients and drug users as well.

The police action, unfortunately, will probably just cause the protest to grow.

Although many in the Occupy movement have consistently aimed their criticism at a financial sector they believe rewards the very people who have led America into an economic downfall, critics respond that the message seems to come down to childish demands by many protesters for high-paying jobs, universal health care and free education.

The protesters have a point — especially about the cost of higher education.

An Associated Press report this week by higher education writer Justin Pope tied in the Occupy demands with a disturbing trend that University of California and California State University students and parents know all too well — how the bill at public universities has escalated almost beyond comprehension in the past decade.

And guess who's footing most of the bills? They are.

But as Pope reports, this came at a time when more and more Americans were flocking to higher education just to succeed in a rapidly changing, if recessionary, economy. Over the last decade, however, states picked up less and less of the costs and asked students and parents to take up more.

What also happened is that the federal government picked some of the slack, with more financial aid — federal student loans are up 57 percent over the last decade. The total loan volume is more than \$1 trillion.

But this did little to push back price hikes. Meanwhile, students from poorer families were helped through expanded Pell Grants, and tuition tax credits salvaged the bite of college costs for higher income families. This left middle-class families to take up the increasing burden.

One result has been students taking on astronomical debt just to pay for college — the average debt owed by graduates

has passed \$20,000.

President Barack Obama has responded this week with a proposal that wouldn't do anything about the overall costs of public education but should help lower the monthly loan payments starting next year and also would consolidate many education loans at a lower interest rate.

But, as Obama knows, there's only so much the federal government can do these days. And states are singing the same tune.

Taxpayers who aren't also footing college bills might not have much sympathy. After all, shouldn't those who directly benefit from a college education be on the hook for paying for it? And can't public universities do more to hold down costs?

But if you look at the situation from a market perspective, the picture gets clearer. Costs at four-year public universities and community colleges increased 8 percent nationwide this year, while enrollment continued to rise. Tuition is up 21 percent four-year public universities in California and 37 percent at community colleges.

As demand grew, state support, which had been climbing in the 1980s and '90s, dropped 23 percent during the last decade. This happened while overall family incomes were also headed downward. For UC, the system took a \$650 million budget cut this year that could grow larger in a couple of months.

At UC Santa Cruz, tuition rose 18 percent this year, to \$12,192; the overall cost is about \$31,000 a year. Anticipated future increases the next four years would take tuition to \$22,000 and the overall cost to more than \$40,000 a year.

That's a huge amount for middle-class families to come up with. And it's money California says it needs to spend on other priorities.

Will anything change? Probably not. Public universities pass along the state budget cuts in terms of price increases for students with little incentive to change.

But the escalating costs of college clearly have moved into the out-of-control stage, and not just in California. Saddling families and students with crushing debt is not the answer.

At the least, public universities can do more to ensure students graduate in four years, although with cutbacks in classes, this also becomes difficult. They can also hold down their own administrative costs.

Otherwise, Americans will have to get used to the idea that not everyone can afford to go to college.