

Fresno State students face new fee hikes

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BY HANNAH FURFARO

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Fresno State could soon join nine other California State University campuses levying new fees under a proposal that's facing pushback from critics who worry the extra cost would burden students.

A "student success" fee -- which is intended to help Fresno State students graduate faster -- has already been adopted by nine of the 23 CSUs since 2011 to offset steep budget cuts during the recession years.

CSU officials note that the fee is used for campus-specific purposes, like hiring more advisers or extending library hours. Michael Uhlenkamp, spokesman for the CSU system, said that although voters -- through Proposition 30 -- and lawmakers have hiked funding for education in the past two years, the CSU budget is still \$400 million less than it was in 2007.

During the recession "we were just trying to maintain operations, keep the doors open, keep the lights on, and it's services -- which are leading to student success -- that are on the chopping block," he said.

But some worry the fee is a way to finagle more money out of students without raising annual tuition, which is set by CSU trustees and has been frozen at \$5,472 for the past three years. Costs for room and board, plus hundreds of dollars in mandatory fees that pay for everything from healthcare to facilities, add to the bill.

Fresno State students this year paid \$815 in fees to cover those extra costs. That's up from \$537 in 2007 -- and more than double the \$370 students spent in 2004. Students across the CSU pay \$1,223 on average, while California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo students pay the most, at \$3,252 per year.

Fresno State President Joseph Castro would like to raise those yearly fees by around \$100 per student. He says the money raised, an estimated \$2.3 million, would pay for more services like tutoring and advising. That could translate into more students graduating on time -- just 15% are done in four years -- and saving thousands in tuition dollars.

Castro acknowledged that the higher fee would put additional pressure on students and their families. But, he said, "staying in school an extra year or two puts even more pressure."

Earlier graduations would also help Fresno State move toward a goal set this year by CSU Chancellor Timothy White to grow graduation rates by 10% within 10 years.

"I'd like to do that and even better, so the question for me is, how do we make extra progress in this area?" Castro said. "My belief is we're going to need additional resources to make that happen."

Castro is asking a small group of administrators to draft a fee proposal by mid-May. The university's separate fee advisory committee, which is comprised mostly of students, next fall will plan public forums and other outreach to gather students' feedback. That committee will then make a recommendation to Castro, who will choose whether or not to submit it to White for final approval.

The process -- called alternative consultation -- will substitute the more commonly known practice of holding a referendum. Castro said the students will not vote on the final plan; holding several forums and gathering input through surveys will be a better gauge of opinions, he said.

Faculty Senate Vice President Kevin Ayotte, a member of Castro's administrative ad hoc fee committee, equated the idea to paying taxes: some taxpayers may not support a certain tax, but "as a society we recognize the need to generate revenue to fix roads and provide services that we are collectively responsible for."

Castro has backed off an initial goal to raise fees before next school year. If there is an increase, it won't be until 2015, the Fresno State president said.

Student government leader Moses Menchaca said he's relieved Castro is giving the campus community more time to deliberate. Students will now have their voices heard, he said, and ultimately decide what's best for Fresno State.

But Menchaca said there's still room for concern, such as whether the extra dollars will be used to expand programs that fees typically cover -- like recreation and health care -- or to fund extra classes or hire professors, which tuition usually covers.

That's a question the entire CSU system is grappling with, he said.

"At what point do we become a public-funded school versus a private-funded school?" he said. "At what percentage is the state funding the school versus the students?"

Last month, school administrators at Sonoma State University withdrew a \$500 student success fee measure after an outcry from student and faculty groups. Other CSU campuses -- including San Diego, Fullerton and Dominguez Hills -- are currently considering an increase.

Athletics fee in the works

Fresno State is also considering a higher athletics fee, which Castro says would help plug a \$1.5 million athletics budget hole and fund programs like men's wrestling and a new women's sport.

Castro offered few details but said it could be higher than the proposed student success fee and may be phased in over a couple years. The fee will also be discussed during student forums next fall.

He said he expects the fee to be a "harder sell" for students -- especially those who don't play sports or attend games. But the university needs the extra cash, he said, if it plans to re-introduce a fan favorite -- men's wrestling -- and another women's program in the near future.

The idea is drawing ire from some students, who say a higher athletics fee would be tough to swallow. Students already pay a yearly athletics fee, which allows them free access to all Fresno State athletic events except football.

Kylie Anderson, a sophomore studying psychology, said she's reluctant to shell out even more each year.

"Student fees should benefit everyone who is paying them, so in terms of the money that's going to wrestling or athletes, I don't know (how) that benefits every student paying that extra, however much it turns out to be," she said.

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6412, [hfurfaro@fresnobee.com](mailto:hfurfarofresnobee.com) or @hannahfurfaro on Twitter.