



Getting more than we pay for is the Sooner way. Unfortunately, the price just went up.

When the State House of Representatives decisively passed HB 1748 February 26, 2003, a cautiously hopeful sigh of relief was almost audible throughout Oklahoma higher education—and nowhere more than at the University of Oklahoma. A companion bill still has to maneuver through the State Senate and be signed by the governor, but if any light exists at the end of a dismal fiscal tunnel, this is it.

This legislation, for the first time, would remove the tuition cap, giving the presidents and regents of OU and OSU, with Oklahoma State Regents approval, the right to set their own tuitions up to the average of the Big 12 Conference's 11 public universities. (Baylor University is private.) Other state colleges and universities would use regional averages for similar institutions.

The effect of this legislation would be huge.

For as long as any of us can remember, OU's tuition has come in the lowest of the low among these peer universities—not a bad thing in itself if legislative appropriations were sufficient to maintain operational funding at least at the half-way mark. But that has not happened, is not likely to happen even in good times, and certainly will not happen in this time of economic crisis.

With Oklahoma facing a revenue shortfall of \$600 million and counting, the University—along with all state agencies and others throughout the country—has experienced dramatically reduced funding. OU has cut \$25 million from its budget in the last two years with more in sight. Administrative costs have been pared to five percent, one of the lowest among all universities and colleges, with the

reclaimed money redirected to academic areas. Everyone is being asked to stretch dollars, work a little harder. Still for the coming year OU faces a \$32 million deficit universitywide.

The expected Norman campus shortfall alone is \$19 million. Without more tuition income, President David Boren is left with draconian options: requiring as many as 30 faculty/staff furlough days, slashing library periodical subscriptions, eliminating 800-900 courses and class sections, laying off large numbers of personnel—or combinations of the above. Such measures surely would impact adversely the remarkable progress the University has made during the eight years of Boren's administration.

Historically at OU, we have prided ourselves in providing a good education at a bargain basement price; the taxpayers of Oklahoma have gotten their money's worth. Today the quality of that education has skyrocketed, made possible largely by vastly improved support from the private sector and, yes, from the legislature in better years. Yet tuition, with in-state students currently paying approximately 13 percent of the cost of their educations, has remained a best buy and will continue to be, even with the anticipated increases.

For instance, compare OU's bottom-dwelling 2002-03 resident tuition of \$2,929 to top-ranked Missouri at \$5,552 or middle-ranked Texas at \$3,950 (whose increase to \$4,819, incidentally, is pending final clearance). The Big 12 average is \$3,914 this year—but each of the institutions, like Texas, also is working on their own tuition hikes for next year. The non-resident gap is even wider, with the Big 12 average at \$11,534 and OU at \$8,086. Covering the shortfall could require \$750 to \$900 more annually from Sooner stu-

dents, but Boren believes OU's total costs would still rank 11th or 12th in the Big 12.

Boren has been tireless in garnering support for Norman State Representative Bill Nation's HB 1748—but not just with other legislators. With new Higher Education Chancellor Paul Risser at his side, he visited the OU Student Congress to answer questions and seek backing—which he received. He rallied his administrative team and ventured out to meetings of every student group who would have them, every residence center, every sorority and fraternity.

In response to student concerns, Boren declared that this legislation required OU and OSU tuition and fees to remain below the Big 12 average, that each year the State Regents would report to the Legislature and the governor on adjustments to tuition and fees, that need-based tuition waivers would be increased by the same percentage as any tuition increase. This student financial aid, by the way, will come from the tuition increase itself, Boren's ongoing policy having been to commit about 30 percent of any such increase to this purpose.

Boren's style is to end his presentations with an appeal for help in whatever form—and from this technique have come some remarkably good suggestions. Graduate Student Senate vice chair John Harris proposed that a \$2 fee be attached to non-student football tickets, which would result in \$1 million a year exclusively for the academic program. Boren and Athletics Director Joe Castiglione jumped all over this proposition, and it was done.

Guiding a bill through the Legislature is considerably more complicated and far-reaching in its impact. But for the future of the University of Oklahoma, we can only hope for a similar outcome. —CJB