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WKU regents OK 4 percent tuition hike with final vote next month

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Western Kentucky University moved ahead with a 4 percent tuition hike for students Tuesday during a Board of Regents meeting, but a final decision won't come from the group until it meets June 22.

The proposed increase to resident undergraduate tuition is expected to generate \$5,574,000, which will be used to pay for a 4 percent salary increase pool for full-time employees, according to meeting materials. Details will be finalized in the fall, and employees could start seeing more money in their paychecks beginning Jan. 1 next year.

"We have tried to do the best we can to recognize that compensation for our employees is important," said Ann Mead, WKU's senior vice president for finance and administration.

According to WKU's proposed tuition and fees schedule, WKU's undergraduate rate per semester would increase from its current \$5,101 to \$5,301.

The undergraduate nonresident rate would increase from \$12,756 to \$13,248, and the rate for resident graduate students would rise from \$589 per credit hour to \$607.

WKU's Board of Regents won't be able to arrive at an official decision until the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education approves its requested rate increase June 22. The council has placed a cap of 6 percent on tuition hikes over the next two years, with a 4 percent increase being the maximum allowed in any one year.

During a presentation, Mead said WKU has tried to keep tuition affordable for students while balancing its budget over the last two decades.

"It's worth noting that in many of these years, where we had tuition increases in the 3, 4 and 5 percent range, we were not passing on large increases to students we were finding ways to solve these problems ourselves," she said.

At the same time, Mead noted the university has struggled to prioritize salary increases for staff.

She said the last significant raise for staff came in 2008 with a 4 percent salary increase pool.

Meeting materials did note some downsides to asking the CPE to approve a 4 percent hike, such as causing students to borrow more money to attend WKU.

Additionally, if WKU asks for a 4 percent hike next year, it can only get a 2 percent hike in the following year. Meeting material noted that "this will not be sufficient to fund a planned 4 percent salary increase in that year."

Tamela Smith, who represents WKU staff on the board, said she appreciates the raise, especially because staff rather than faculty bore the brunt of budget cuts this year.

As a result, retention and recruitment of staff has been challenging, Smith said.



“I’m seeing more staff leaving the university,” after the job cuts, she said. “It does make it more difficult to recruit.”

WKU is also proposing an increase to online course fee for full-time students from \$100 to \$150 per credit hour. At WKU, full-time undergraduate students pay the fee in addition to the university’s full-time rate.

In an interview after the meeting, Faculty Regent Claus Ernst said he opposes student fees that don’t have specific purposes and that instead are used to plug budget holes.

Ernst said that the tuition increase is closer to a 5 percent increase when the additional revenue gathered through the online fee is added. Some courses required for WKU degree programs are only offered online, raising questions about fairness to students.

“I know that it’s not affordable for everyone,” Ernst said.

Looking back his roughly 30-year career at WKU, Ernst said the university used to get two thirds of its funding from the state and now gets about 22 percent.

“Tuition has filled up the rest,” he said. “There’s going to be eventually a collision of things that people can no longer afford it. We are pricing middle class people out of a college education.”

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