

Penn State New Ken to freeze tuition for 2015-16

By R.A. Monti and Tom Yerace
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As the price of college soars, Penn State New Kensington is hoping to provide a bit of relief to students.

The campus, which is in Upper Burrell, will freeze the tuition for students for the 2015-16 school year.

“We know our students and their families are working a lot of hours to get tuition dollars,” said Kevin Snider, PSNK chancellor. “We've been asking for reasonable tuition. It's something we need.

“We have students who are struggling for every dollar,” he said.

Penn State President Eric Barron told officials from eight of the university's branches that their tuition would stay flat at an all-university meeting Friday.

Along with PSNK, the Beaver, DuBois, Fayette Greater Allegheny, Shenango, Mont Alto and Wilkes-Barre campuses will keep their tuition level.

Staying close to home

For PSNK's nearly 900 students, that keeps tuition at \$12,718 for in-state pupils and \$19,404 for out-of-state.

Snider says this is the latest in a trend for his campus, where tuition costs have risen a total of \$122 over the last two school years.

Snider hopes the low costs keep Alle-Kiski Valley students close to home for at least the first few years of their college career.

“The amount of money that's saved can get upwards of tens of thousands of dollars,” Snider said. “Students can stay at home and get small class sizes, save some money and be prepared for their future.”

Comparing costs

Here is a comparison of the per-credit costs of area community colleges and Penn State New Kensington.

The costs for Penn State are for a full-time student taking 12 or more credits. Part-time students pay \$524.

The higher figure for Penn State tuition listed below is for students in certain majors such as business and engineering.

Residents* Non-residents*

Penn State New Ken \$530 to \$600
\$530 to \$600

Community College of Allegheny
County \$104 \$209

Butler County Community College \$127
\$223

Westmoreland County Community
College \$98 \$180

Source: Colleges

*For PSNK, “resident” refers to students with a Pennsylvania permanent address; for the others, it refers to residency in the county in which that school is located.

Freezing tuition is the exception to the norm in higher education.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average cost for a year of college at a public institution was about \$19,300 during the 2011-12 school year, the most recent data available.

Further back, the average cost was about \$14,500 for the 2001-02 school year.

Low-cost alternative: Community college

Those costs are much lower at community colleges.

Community colleges offering two-year degree programs are a logical alternative to attending branch campuses such as Penn State New Kensington. “We’re all fighting for a declining population of graduating high school seniors,” said Nicholas Neupauer, president of **Butler County Community College** and chairman of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges.

He said that enrollment in community colleges usually follows a pattern in relation to the economy.

If the economy is in decline, Neupauer said, enrollment in community college degree programs increases as more people seek a degree to help them land a job. If the economy is rising, enrollment in non-credit, non-degree programs rises.

Tuesday Stanley, president of Westmoreland County Community College, said, “It’s about fit: for students who want to go somewhere close and live at home, who want a specific program that we are offering, and they want a program where they can cover the cost of attendance.”

No plans to follow suit

Officials from the three community colleges that serve the Alle-Kiski Valley — Westmoreland, Butler and the Community College of Allegheny County — said their institutions have no plans to freeze tuition.

In fact, according to Daniel Gross, director of public affairs for the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, only one community college — The Community College of Philadelphia — was able to freeze tuition for the current school year.

Stanley said a tuition increase at WCCC is likely in the 2015-16 school year, since Westmoreland commissioners reduced county funding to the college. She doesn’t view the tuition freeze at PSNK and a possible increase at WCCC as changing the landscape.

“Our price differential right now is not that close,” she said.

At CCAC, spokeswoman Elizabeth Johnston said there's no plan to raise tuition, but she wouldn't call that a freeze. "Freezing, in my mind, involves a commitment over a certain period of time."

At BCCC, Neupauer said his board of trustees has yet to discuss tuitions. But he doesn't see Penn State's move as influencing the decision.

"I'm not so sure that it impacts us one way or another," Neupauer said.

But Neupauer noted that those BCCC students who further their education at Penn State campuses may save some money as a result of Penn State's selected campus tuition freezes.

Freezes in the past

Community colleges have frozen tuition in the recent past.

Anna Marie Palatella, a WCCC spokeswoman, said the school raised its tuition to \$76 per credit in 2008-09 and kept it there for the next two school years.

She said it's hard to say whether that had any effect on enrollment, which jumped by almost 1,000 students by 2010-11 because they were recession years.

Susan Chagnon, a spokeswoman for BCCC, said the school didn't increase tuition from 2007 to 2009 and then again in 2012-13.

"In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, many colleges were able to pass their budgets with no increases in tuition," said Gross of the state community college commission.

"Back then, community colleges saw annual increases in state support and greater local sponsor contributions than exist today.

"Today, declining state and local support has made it increasingly difficult for Pa.'s community colleges to freeze tuition."

Snider said he thinks schools like PSNK will have to continue to keep tuition low as a selling point.

"I think everyone's trying to be as competitive as they can," he said. "It's trying to meet the needs for students.

"I think that's what drives most of us (in higher education): We want students to get a college degree."

The National Center for Education Statistics states that college graduates earned an average of \$46,900 in 2012.

A person with a high school degree made an average of \$30,000 in that year.

“We're doing everything we can,” Snider said.