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Climbing costs strain colleges, families

Schools add amenities, expand to compete for students

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May 3, 2009

Three or four times a week, Nicole Angeli straps on ropes and harnesses and clambers up the 33-foot climbing wall in the [Johns Hopkins University](#) recreation center. The 22-year-old senior says her strenuous climbs reduce stress from the demands of classes.

But the climbing wall, installed by Hopkins in 2002 at a cost of \$100,000, also represents the lengths to which universities go to pamper students - and one reason why college costs have soared in recent years, far outstripping inflation.

Hopkins is now twice as expensive as it was 15 years ago. For next academic year, the total cost for Hopkins undergraduates, including tuition, room and board, will be \$53,390. In 1994-1995, the cost was \$27,040. But the sticker shock extends well beyond Hopkins; the average tuition at the nation's private colleges has more than doubled since 1995.

"Students are looking for Internet access and climbing walls and swimming pools," said Fred Puddester, senior associate dean for finance and administration in Hopkins' Krieger School of Arts and Sciences. "These are amenities that all of our competitors have and that we need to attract those students."



Senior Nicole Angeli works her way up Hopkins' \$100,000 climbing wall. (Baltimore Sun photo by Elizabeth Malby / April 22, 2009)

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Of course, many other factors contribute to the rising costs. Universities have added programs and staff at a rapid clip. Faculty salaries have gone up. And Johns Hopkins, for instance, has to maintain two principal campuses, keep up aging buildings, update technology and cover health care for the largest private work force in Maryland.

For years, parents have grumbled about the escalating cost of private universities but paid up anyway. Rising family incomes helped cover the bills, and students and parents burdened themselves with loans, believing the high price of the schools would eventually pay off. The universities pitched in by funneling more money to financial aid from their ballooning endowments.

But with the economy in recession, endowments falling and tuition still climbing, college costs are coming under increasing scrutiny. As high school seniors and their parents make college decisions, experts say more people are deciding based on price and wondering why college is so expensive.

"I think we're reaching a point of consumer revolt," said William G. Durden, president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., and a former Hopkins professor, who says costs have reached a "crisis" level. "There's going to be a point when we're going to wake up and, just like [General Motors](#), boom, we're in bankruptcy."

(GM has not filed for bankruptcy, though the move is possible; Chrysler filed on

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At Dickinson, tuition, room and board total nearly \$50,000 this year. That still doesn't cover the total cost of the education, which Durden puts at about \$61,000 per student. The difference is made up by fundraising and the endowment.

Durden believes it's time for colleges to pull back on the "extravagances" that have come to define residential life at American universities: fancy recreation centers, dorms that resemble luxury hotels and dining halls that serve fine cuisine. "What if we all agreed to live in double rooms, survive and even thrive in double rooms?" he has written.

Fueling the cost increase is an expansion of support staff. Full-time workers such as computer specialists and loan counselors have doubled over the past two decades, while those of other professions increased by only 40 percent, according to a recent report. The report, by the National Bureau of Economic Research, is based on data submitted to the government by 2,782 public and private universities.

Hopkins, like other universities, is taking measures to cut costs. Hiring and salaries have largely been frozen. Other efficiencies have been found. The campus used to have two imaging labs; now there is one. There were three machine shops; now there is one. And a co-generation plant is being built on the Homewood campus, saving an estimated \$900,000 a year in electricity costs.

Anytime savings are quickly consumed by new expenditures, such as faculty salaries and amenities. This year, Hopkins is putting more money into financial aid, anticipating a greater need as rising unemployment and stock market losses have made it harder for people to pay.

Lili Duchene, a Hopkins sophomore from New York, said as she awaited her financial aid package for next year: "You do get a good education [at Hopkins]. But I'm not sure if it's worth \$53,000 a year."

Duchene, 19, thinks the value comes more in the Hopkins degree and the weight it carries in the job market. University officials say undergraduates also benefit from Hopkins' broad mission as a research university - the graduate students who invite undergrads into their labs, the professors on the cutting edge of new knowledge.

"Every student who comes here comes to this institution precisely because we do all those things," said Adam Falk, dean of Hopkins' arts and sciences school. And those things are expensive. But Falk said a Hopkins education is supposed to be an investment, and families are expected to sacrifice for it.

Using the Consumer Price Index as a guide, Hopkins' \$18,800 tuition in 1995 would be the equivalent of \$26,239 today. But instead the actual figure is far more - \$39,150. Puddester says a better measure is the Higher Education Price Index - a formula devised to measure the costs of items purchased most by universities. By that yardstick, Hopkins' tuition has held steady.

"This is a lot of money, but there are families that can afford it," he said. As for the others who can't, "I worry if our financial aid program can keep up with the needs."

This year, 24.2 percent of tuition revenue is going directly to financial aid - the highest portion in memory, meaning the richest students are increasingly subsidizing everyone else. At Hopkins, students get help, with an average need-based grant award of \$27,000.

(In the overall budget, which includes grants, endowment and state aid, 15 percent of income goes to financial aid.)

Goucher College in Towson, as a liberal arts college and not a research university, has tuition that is somewhat lower than Hopkins. Next year's total will be about \$44,000. President Sanford J. Ungar has frozen salaries and is leaving open positions unfilled.

But he said the idea that student luxuries are out of control is an exaggeration. Goucher this fall is opening a \$48 million Athenaeum - a center of learning to house the library, a gathering space, cafe and art gallery.

"It's gorgeous, but, I mean, what's wrong with that?" Ungar said. "When we get to the point that we have to apologize because our new building is nice, then I think we're really in trouble."

He also said it's only fair for the wealthiest families to subsidize the less well-off. "There are some people who can pay the full cost and should not be denied that opportunity," he said, dryly.

Still, he expects there will be a reckoning. "Whether it comes next year or in five years, we will reach a point where there's resistance. There's going to have to be a re-examination of the funding model for higher education."

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