

Tuition hikes at Portland State University spark outrage

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Students at Portland State University (PSU) expressed their outrage at the ever-soaring costs of education at a public Q&A forum on Thursday evening. The student government, Associated Students of Portland State University (ASPSU), held the forum in response to the administration proposal to hike tuition by 14 percent over the next two years.

If the proposal is passed, tuition will rise by 5 percent by the fall term of 2018, which translates into an additional \$440 per year for a full-time resident student, or \$610 for graduate students. The next year, tuition will go up by an additional 9 percent, reaching a total of \$10,050 in annual tuition and fees for resident undergraduates.

By the completion of the 2019-20 school year, students will have paid an additional \$1,270 in tuition. At the same time, costs of living are soaring in the Portland metro area with only minimal increases in income. The minimum wage is increasing from \$11.25 per hour to \$13.25 per hour by 2020. For a student working 20 hours per week, their annual income before taxes would increase from \$11,700 in 2018 to \$13,000 in 2019 and finally rising to \$13,780 in 2020.

With a generous calculation of \$2,080 in additional income over two years, that leaves only \$810 remaining after payments for tuition and fees. Taking into account the rising costs of rent, food, childcare, books and transportation, students are facing ever greater burdens just to survive.

These burdens are not isolated to students at PSU. Tuition hikes are also being proposed at Oregon State University in Corvallis, as well as at public universities in West Virginia, Missouri, Arizona, Iowa, California, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico.

At the PSU tuition forum, administrators and deans attempted to explain why it is necessary to increase

tuition. Kevin Reynolds, the vice president for finance and administration, began his presentation by acknowledging that he and the student representatives “come at this from very different perspectives.”

He attempted to justify the increases by showing how the tuition increases at PSU will be lower than the increases at other universities around the nation, pointing to the extraordinary costs at other urban campuses, such as the University of Illinois at Chicago. Later on, he argued that the main causes of rising costs are the increase in faculty wages, ongoing retirement fund obligations and a lack of state funding.

Such explanations seek to pit students against university workers, instructors and retirees, offering a zero-sum solution. If students demand the right to an affordable education, administrators say, they will be responsible for faculty cuts and the stagnation of academic development.

However, the majority of students were not buying their excuses, speaking to the issues faced by faculty and students. One audience member asked him, “How can I afford a \$400 increase when I can’t even pay for a \$100 book? I am already choosing between eating and buying books.” Others demanded to know why administrators couldn’t take pay cuts to their six-figure salaries, which continue to increase annually.

In an effort to mitigate the anger emerging from the audience, a representative from the Financial Aid Office offered a gloomy look at the limited options that students could use to pay for higher costs, which mostly consisted of taking on even more student loan debt. After going through the list of meager increases to state grants and noting that scholarship funding remains flat, he told students, “The difficult decision about whether to borrow more is one that you’re going to have to make. ... To be completely transparent, I wanted

to let you know that it's out there. Interest rates aren't terrible."

This is an insulting offer to students who are already suffocating beneath massive loan debt. More than half of PSU undergraduate students take on an average of \$7,600 in loans each year, amounting to \$30,800 after four years. On a national basis, over 70 percent of students graduate with an average of \$37,000 in debt. In the last decade, tuition costs have grown 35 percent while student loan debt has grown by 400 percent, piling up more than \$2.1 trillion and growing in student debt.

"At the university level across the nation, it always seems that debt is rising for students, college tuition costs are outrunning inflation, people's incomes are stagnating and at the same time students don't have the opportunity to comprehend what is going on," PSU student Camilo Abreu told KATU 2 News.

After the abrupt end of the forum, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke with Santiago, who is a new undergraduate student at PSU. "They get paid a lot of money to come up with the best solutions, but they're not doing that," he said. "It's not the right model to run the school ... Schools are not a business. They shouldn't be, [but] they're kind of becoming like that."

The ASPSU has recognized that "Education is a right, not a privilege," setting a list of demands for the upcoming Board of Trustees meeting on April 12, including a three-year tuition freeze or, if tuition is increased, that administrative salaries "be proportionally reduced."

The IYSSE welcomes and encourages the development of opposition to tuition hikes and the running of universities as for-profit businesses, where the cost of education and services are passed along to struggling students, lecturers and staff while university administrators live in luxury.

However, sowing illusions in the possibility of pressuring the administration and state legislature for a tuition freeze or offsets in administrators' pay is a political dead end which will do nothing to guarantee public education as a right for all.

Students must demand the right to a free high-quality education and the immediate forgiveness of all student loan debt. Hundreds of billions of dollars that should be spent on the universities, public schools, healthcare,

housing and adequate pay, are instead being spent on imperialist wars in the Middle East, Asia, Europe and Africa and preparations for even wider wars.

While anywhere from 80 to 95 percent of income gains have gone to the top 1 percent in the past decade, living conditions have deteriorated for broad layers of working class Americans. Three individuals own as much as the bottom half of the United States population, and six individuals own as much as the bottom 60 percent of the global population.

The IYSSE at Portland State University urges students and faculty who are interested in a fight to defend public education to look toward the strike movement of teachers in Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia, Arizona and other states that has developed in defiance of the unions and the two big business parties. In the fight to guarantee the right to free high-quality education it will be necessary to unite the struggles of youth, students and the working class internationally in a direct confrontation with the entire capitalist system.

Attend the next meeting of the IYSSE at PSU :

Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship
Wednesday, April 11, 3:00-5:00 p.m.

Urban Center Building, Room 212 (Parson's Gallery)



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