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Families' share of tuition has risen

NYPIRG report shows declining taxpayer support for SUNY schools.

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By Jon Hand and Erik Kriss
Staff writers

State University students and the New York Public Interest Research Group Thursday called on state leaders to spare higher education from any end-of-the-year budget cuts.

NYPIRG released a report showing taxpayer support for the State University of New York system has shrunk over the last decade, leaving students and their families to pay more.

While the inflation-adjusted cost for tuition and fees at New York's four-year public colleges and universities grew by 97 percent from 1990 to 2000, state support declined by 22 percent, according to the report.

New York now ranks 14th among states as having the costliest tuition and fees for its four-year public institutions, while its community colleges rank fifth, according to the report, "Shifting the Burden: Shifting the Costs of Higher Education from State Governments to New York Families."

"My father works two jobs to pay for my tuition and my mother works, too," said Amy Donley of Baldwinsville, a junior at the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry at Syracuse, where she participated in a news conference Thursday. "I hardly ever see my father because he works all the time, but he's determined to help me get an education and this is the only way."

There is widespread speculation in Albany that lawmakers will return after the Nov. 5 elections to grapple with a looming budget deficit.

"It is our collective view that colleges and universities be supported in a manner that ensures affordability and be spared reductions in state support or hikes in the costs of attending college," NYPIRG said in a letter to Gov. George Pataki and state legislative leaders.

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The portion of the total SUNY budget funded by tuition grew from 49 percent in 1991-92 to 60 percent in 2000-01, the report said.

Pataki Budget Division spokesman Kevin Quinn called the NYPIRG report "fundamentally flawed."

"It completely ignores the multibillion-dollar capital investments we've been making to improve SUNY campuses across the state," Quinn said. "The governor has held the line on SUNY tuition for seven years in a row, including this year, when we were facing one of the biggest fiscal challenges due to 9/11 and the national economic downturn."

The NYPIRG report does show that New York's four-year public college costs have increased more slowly than the national average since a newly elected Pataki and the legislature raised base tuition by \$750, to \$3,400, at four-year SUNY schools in 1995.

"Costs have gone up and financial aid has been limited significantly," said Sean Vormwald, program coordinator for the Syracuse University and ESF chapter of NYPIRG. "The majority of the burden of a public education is now on the students and their families. No longer is it on the state, and that is not the way it is supposed to be."

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