

COMMENTARY

Senate proposal would cut state college tuition by \$3,000 a year

By Liv Finne

The Senate and House proposed state budgets for 2015-17 take sharply different approaches to solving the problem of rising tuition at Washington's public institutions of higher learning. As everyone knows, the out-sized tuition increases of the last ten years have made college inaccessible to many middle-class families in our state. The Senate budget proposal offers these families, and their students, a distinctly brighter future than the House's budget.

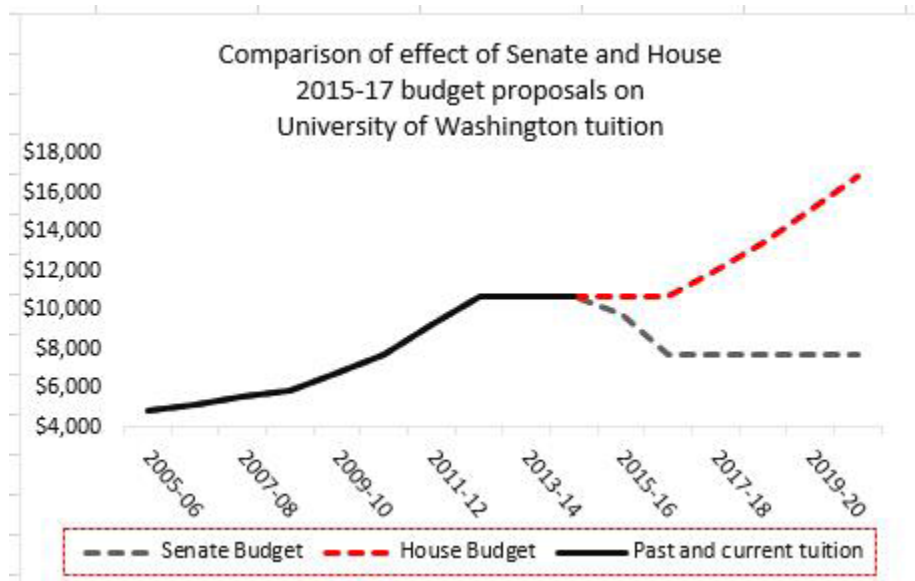
Starting under Governor Gregoire, the state cut funding for public colleges and universities, while at the same time telling administrators they could impose large tuition increases. The increased burden falls hardest on middle-class families trying to gain access to college for their children leaving high school.

To fix the problem, the Senate's proposed plan would lower college tuition and cap future increases. Tuition at the University of Washington and Washington State University would drop by \$1,000 for the 2015-16 academic year, and by an additional \$2,000 the following year. Tuition, not including mandatory fees, would return to 2010-11 rates, about \$7,560, a roughly 25% reduction.

Under the Senate's plan, Central, Eastern and Western Washington universities and Evergreen State college, would all drop their tuition to \$5,400 a year by 2016-17.

In contrast, the House proposed plan would freeze tuition at the University of Washington and Washington State University at \$10,560 for 2015-17. After 2017, the House proposed budget would tell administrators they could again start increasing the tuition they charge students, as they had in the past.

The following graph compares the Senate and House approaches to tuition policy. Tuition increases after 2018 are based on the average rate of past increases from 2005 to 2014, or 12% annually.



Liv Finne
Director, WPC's Center for
Education

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washingtonpolicy.org

This graph shows how tuition was held at 2012-13 levels when the Republican-controlled Senate restored some higher education funding in the 2013-15 budget.

Washington citizens provide their hard-earned tax dollars to support the state's award-winning system of public colleges and universities. Under Governor Gregoire tuition levels rose too high for many families in the state, where the median income level is \$58,000. In addition to helping students develop their knowledge and skills in the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural and mathematical sciences, our growing high-tech economy depends on skilled college graduates to fill the jobs of the future. It is entirely reasonable, and good public policy, to cut tuition rates to allow more working families access to higher education opportunities.

Adding state funding to Higher Education, and reducing tuition to 2010-11 levels, would provide Washington citizens a real, tangible benefit. The increase in state aid is made possible by \$3.2 billion in extra tax revenue Olympia expects to receive for the next state budget.

The Senate and House budgets take very different approaches to the problem of rising tuition at state public institutions of Higher Education. The Senate would lower tuition and cap future increases. The House budget would temporarily freeze tuition, but then allow tuition to increase. The Senate plan is the better, fairer approach to help working families in Washington send their children to college.