Legislators may consider raising college tuitions

By Donna Winchester, Times Staff Writer

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Editor's note: Perfect storm is an overused metaphor. But on the eve of this year's legislative session, the equivalent of Hurricanes Andrew, Katrina and Charley is bearing down at once on Florida's education system. A bad economy, a volatile state tax system and a well-meaning but destructive class-size amendment are on the verge of swamping our K-12 kids. It's no better at our public universities, where it's harder than ever to get in. Classes are crowded for those who do, and course offerings are diminished. Even the flagship university is taking on water. And to think, it could have been avoided.

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For years, quality and quantity have played tug of war in Florida's university system. Either more students or more quality. But there wasn't money to do both. As the 11 public universities brace for another round of budget cuts, people are increasingly wondering if there is enough money to do either. It's hard to argue that quality and access haven't both suffered since fiscal year 2005-06. • Florida revenue available to support state activities, including universities, has fallen about 18 percent since then. In budget years 2007-08 and 2008-09, the economic crisis and declining tax revenues have forced $285 million in cuts to the state university system statewide. Each university has had to reduce spending anywhere from $2 million to more than $70 million. • Universities have cut back by freezing enrollment, leaving vacant positions unfilled, and asking professors to take on heavier class loads, despite an increase in college applications.

Several, including the University of South Florida, have used one-time funds they had planned on replacing with new resources when the economy recovered. But the hoped-for recovery has not occurred. The January special session reduced higher education funding by another 4 percent, and there is no reason to think things will improve soon.

The community college system has suffered as well. Unlike K-12 school districts, Florida's community colleges receive lump-sum funding from the Legislature rather than a certain amount per student.

While the state's poor economy has led it to cut funding to community colleges in recent years — more than $116 million in 2008 — enrollment has grown by about 50,000 students.

Community college system chancellor Willis N. Holcombe says the system is on track to grow by another 50,000 next year. If colleges can't add classes, they won't be able to serve those students.

Gov. Charlie Crist has recommended no further cuts to the state university system. Additionally, he wants to dedicate $130 million in federal stimulus money to the universities.
But as state revenues continue to drop — some predict next year’s shortfall could top $5 billion, which is $2 billion more than was expected just a few months ago — a bright future for higher education is far from certain.

Hiring freezes and holds on travel are half measures at best when it comes to making up millions of dollars in budget shortfalls. Eliminating programs and laying off faculty add up to larger savings, but ultimately will affect quality.

This spring, the Legislature may consider another option: raising tuition.

Undergraduate tuition at Florida universities ranges from $3,400 to $4,000 a year, ranking Florida dead last among the 50 states, according to the most recent College Board tuition survey. While tuition nationwide grew 24 percent between 2003 and 2006, tuition in Florida rose by only 2 percent.

The Bright Futures merit scholarship, paid for by $436 million in lottery proceeds, is a major reason why tuition and fees remain low. But because the state's bill to cover Bright Futures goes up when tuition goes up, lawmakers have resisted significant tuition increases.

Critics of the 11-year-old program say it needs serious review. More than 90 percent of incoming freshmen on some campuses and nearly half of all undergraduates qualify for Bright Futures grants whether they need the tuition boost or not. In 2004, nearly a quarter of University of Florida students who received the scholarship reported a family income of greater than $150,000.

Gov. Charlie Crist is proposing a 5 percent tuition hike for undergraduates, along with a measure that would give all 11 universities the ability to raise tuition by an additional 10 percent this year, providing more than $1 billion over seven years, while holding Bright Futures harmless. The increases would not be covered by the grant — meaning families would have to pay the difference themselves — and 30 percent of the money from the tuition increases would be earmarked for need-based financial aid.

That plan, or one of two bills already introduced in the House and Senate, will come up during the Legislative session, said Bill Edmonds, spokesman for the group that oversees the state's public universities.

"We needed to do something with tuition before these budget cuts," Edmonds said. "Now it's a necessity."

What's already been lost

University of South Florida

$39.4 MILLION in state funding

Where cuts have been made:

• About 400 vacant positions were eliminated, including 175 faculty positions.

• Classes of fewer than 30 students have been reduced by 10 percent while the number of classes with 50 to 59 students has increased by about 30 percent.
• Courses in the College of Education have been reduced, affecting teachers who need courses to retain required endorsements and increasing graduation time for master’s students in education who take most of their classes in the summer.

• One-on-one learning support through the tutoring and learning services center, which conducted about 300 sessions last year, has been eliminated.

• Fees for students enrolled in geology courses have jumped from $150 to $1,000.

University of Florida

$70.4 million in state funding

Where cuts have been made:

• More than 400 faculty and staff positions have been eliminated, including nearly 300 vacant positions; about 100 staff members and eight faculty members were laid off.

• Physical education classes eliminated.

• Admission to some doctoral programs, including philosophy and German, were canceled for three years come fall.

• Vietnamese and Korean language subject tracks were eliminated.

Florida State University

$39.9 million in state funding

Where cuts have been made:

• About 180 vacant faculty and staff posts were eliminated; 45 employees were laid off.

• Faculty took on increased teaching assignments and class sizes increased.

• Library, computer lab hours reduced.

What’s at risk

University presidents are imagining a worst-case scenario: an additional budget reduction of 10 percent or more — as much as an additional $35 million loss to each of them. That scenario has university officials scrambling to find ways to cut their budgets even further, fearing that the actions they may be forced to take — eliminating programs, reducing or eliminating student services, laying off faculty and staff — will cause fundamental changes to their institutions. They know that such changes likely will be irrevocable. “I don’t think anybody expects that the cuts that are being discussed now will ever be restored,” said USF spokesman Michael Hoad. “If something is lost now, it’s probably not coming back.”
More students,
more pressures ...

25 percent Increase in the number of
students in Florida's 11 public universities

240,753 Enrollment in 2000
301,135 Enrollment in 2007

35,437 Bachelor's degrees awarded in 2000
47,326 Bachelor's degrees awarded in 2007

$1.9 billion state funding in 2000
$2.3 billion state funding in 2007

The trend holds true at the University of South Florida, where 20,762 freshmen applied for admission to the Tampa campus and 896 applied for admission to the St. Petersburg campus for fall 2007. A year later, 21,968 applied to the Tampa campus and 1,150 applied to the St. Petersburg campus.

Meanwhile, the student-teacher ratio at
USF has continued to increase.

2000: 21 to 1; 2007: 27 to 1; 2008: 28 to 1

… and the nation's cheapest tuition

Florida holds the dubious distinction of having the lowest tuition in the country. Tuition and fees in Vermont, the priciest, are more than three times higher than Florida's. Here's how Florida ranked compared to other states in 2007-08:

Even among Southern states, Florida is far and away the cheapest — and its percentage increase is also the smallest. And Florida, which already was last, is falling further behind its peers in the South when it comes to tuition and fees for full-time resident undergraduates.

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Sources: College Board, Florida Board of Governors, University of South Florida