

Community college tuition may rise

Gov. Mike Easley's proposed budget recommends a 12.7 percent tuition hike

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RALEIGH – Community college students could see a 12.7 percent increase in their tuition next year if legislators accept the budget recommendation of Gov. Mike Easley.

Easley recommended in his proposed budget that the state raise tuition by \$3.50 a semester hour to help offset the costs of paying for enrollment increases at the state's 58 two-year colleges. For a full-time student taking 16 credits, the cost would increase from \$440 a semester to \$496 a semester.

"I don't think it will keep anyone out of college," said Jim Burnett,

vice president of academic affairs for Western Piedmont Community College, "but I think it will affect the number of hours a student takes."

If this holds true, WPCC could see some financial trouble. Burnett said the college is funded by the state based on a formula that determines the full-time equivalency of its students. If the number of credit hours that students are taking goes down, Western Piedmont could see a reduction in its reimbursements.

The State Board of Community Colleges had not recommended raising tuition.

"It's difficult for us to complain when we did better than most," said Martin Lancaster, the president of the N.C. Community College System.

Community colleges consider themselves among the winners in this year's lean budget, even though Easley's proposed

budget cut out about \$100 million of the system's \$128 million request for the fiscal year that starts in July.

The request included \$24 million for summer-term instruction, \$6.1 million for distance learning and \$12.1 million for occupational continuing education. Easley did not recommend paying for any of the programs.

The governor proposed raising tuition as a way to pay for enrollment growth at the community colleges. Higher tuition rates would generate about \$10 million of the \$23.3 million needed to reimburse schools for the increases.

"We're sort of between a rock and a hard place," Lancaster said. "Community colleges are funded differently. We are actually reimbursed for what we have already done. We are always on bended knee to get full reimbursement for

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our enrollment growth. We have already taught those students."

Lancaster said that community college officials would ask the legislature to set aside at least \$1 million for financial aid.

"We strongly support low cost tuition so that all North Carolinians can benefit from our programs," Lancaster said.

Students at Forsyth Technical Community College were upset Thursday about the possibility that their tuitions would increase.

"I think community colleges are for people like me who are financially disabled, so it definitely impacts," said Melissa Mullany, a nursing student at Forsyth Tech. "It

is an environment for people like me. I'm a single mom. I struggle financially."

About 17 percent of students at Forsyth Tech receive financial aid, said Phil McClung, the acting director of the office of student financial services.

"Any tuition increase will have an effect," McClung said. "The main thing we can do is encourage students to apply for financial aid to see what they may qualify for."

Last year, community-college tuition increased from \$26.75 a semester hour to \$27.50.

In addition to the 2 percent salary increase recommended for all state employees, the governor's budget recommends a very small increase – \$6.9 million – to increase

faculty and professional staff salaries. Community colleges had asked for \$27.2 million for faculty and staff raises.

Community college instructors, whose pay ranks near the bottom of the 50 states, are already lobbying for bigger salary increases.

"What we're trying to do is convince folks that the economy of the state is directly linked to the quality of what community colleges can deliver," said Jim Davies, the president of the N.C. Community College Faculty Association.

(Johnson is a reporter for the Winston-Salem Journal. News Herald staff writer Freelin Jones contributed to this story.)