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Course Fee Assessments: West Virginia State College

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The idea of fee assessment for students enrolled in certain kinds of college courses is not a new concept. Courses in the laboratory sciences have been doing it for years. In the arts, the most common examples are found in music and studio art classes. Many institutions charge for private music lessons and some have special fees for painting and sculpture courses that regularly use human models. My own institution charges students extra fees in some photography classes in order to pay for darkroom chemicals and film processing. However, theatre courses at my college (and, I suspect, at most others) do not, as a rule, assess fees for student participation. But we are currently in the process of re-examining our policies regarding fee assessment and exploring new ideas of funding in an era of reduced state appropriations and budget cutbacks.

Our current policy allows us to charge lab fees if we can demonstrate that the class requires materials and direct costs that cannot be met through our traditional budget lines. The two types of theatre classes that generally require "extra" materials are usually technical theatre classes, the most common of which are make-up and scene design courses. Many colleges (mine included) order materials through the bookstore and require students to purchase their make-up kits, lighting templates and drafting materials from there. The system seems to work for the most part, but bookstores do have a habit of marking up the price of these materials significantly above retail. At times, students end up paying more for their make-up kits than they would have if departments ordered the supplies in bulk and made them available to students directly. One possible advantage of fee assessment is that students could quite possibly pay less for their materials than they do now—so long as departments resist the temptation to use the fees in other ways.

One potential drawback to assessing fees in theatre classes is the possible negative effect it could have on enrollment. We've seen a slight decrease in the number of students in our photography and filmmaking classes since the introduction of student fees in those classes seven years ago. Since our state appropriations are tied directly to FTE and student credit hours produced, a decline in enrollment can result in an overall loss of funding. At my institution, we receive about \$3,000.00 per FTE. If we lose five students per semester in a three-hour class that charges fees, it will result in a loss of funding to the college of about \$6,000 per year. Obviously, the fees we could collect from these five students would not compensate for this loss.

The West Virginia State College Board of Directors (the governing body for our four-year colleges) has been studying this issue and may soon draft a policy which will specifically address student fees. While we haven't seen the draft yet, we have been asked to provide the Board with information regarding our current fees. We are anticipating a fairly strict policy that may prohibit charging fees for any course—including laboratory classes. Many college administrators believe that because appropriations to higher education in West Virginia have increased slightly in the past two years (and will probably increase next year), a policy that would eliminate special course fees might make the overall increase in funding more palpable to our state senators and delegates. The dilemma is that the increase will be utilized to pay for faculty raises (definitely justified) and will not go into departments' supply budgets. This puts faculty members in a tough position: whether to support salary increases that are long overdue or insist that we have the freedom to charge fees in order to more effectively teach our classes.

The biggest drawback to student fee assessment, as far as I'm concerned, is the additional burden it places on students. I serve on the college-wide fee committee at my institution and I can attest to the fact that we now have fees for just about everything: yearbook, student newspaper, radio station, literary review, theatre productions, band, choir, art gallery exhibits, campus health center, the campus photographer, student government organizations, and, of course, huge amounts for athletics. We even have two fees called (rather loosely) the "faculty improvement" fee and the "higher education resource" fee. Money that goes to these funds is sometimes difficult to track. And while it is certainly true that tuition and fees don't add up to the real cost of a college education, there is an increasing tendency to assess students for everything under the sun. Like many colleges and universities in West Virginia, we are even considering (and will probably approve) a special "technology" fee this year which will help pay for computer labs and our campus's information infrastructure. Except for athletics (which now has a fee of about \$53.00 per student per semester), the fees are not that much (fifty cents for yearbook, a dollar-fifty for theatre productions, etc.), but my fear is that there are no limits in sight. It may be that we are "nickel and diming" our students to death and the reality is that we're charging a lot more than nickels and dimes.

I would hate to see more students fees and would rather have our academic equipment and supplies budgets go up to meet the needs of the students in our classes. Assessing students for incidental materials in theatre classes (and, perhaps, for all classes) should only be done if: (1) the fees do not exceed the expenses (no "indirect" costs or overhead built in); (2) the costs are truly incidental; and (3) students would save money. I would rather see limited across-the-board tuition and fee increases that would go directly in the coffers of departments so that they can purchase the materials and resources necessary to maintain the quality and academic integrity of their classes.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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