

## HIGHER EDUCATION 'BETTER TODAY,' LEAVITT SAYS

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Utah colleges and universities seemed to come second behind public schools under Gov. Mike Leavitt's tenure.

But Utah System of Higher Education Commissioner Cecelia Foxley says Leavitt keeps a special place in his heart for the state's 10 public colleges and universities and often protected them from harm during recent budget cuts.

Indeed, Leavitt is proud of what he's done for Utah's 10 public colleges and universities.

"Is the system of higher education better today than it was when I became governor? I just don't think there's any measure you could look at that wouldn't say, mission accomplished."

His sentiment applies to initiatives from technology to funding.

But the latter is where things get a little sticky. Just ask a student, who paid anywhere from 7.3 percent to 23.5 percent more in tuition costs this year.

"He could have done a lot of things different," said Aaron Miller, student vice president of Southern Utah University — Leavitt's alma mater, where students this year shouldered the highest tuition increase in the state.

Leavitt considers technology a big part of his higher education legacy.

Online, TV and satellite courses account for 9.2 percent of all enrollments, he said. The Utah Electronic College, created under Leavitt's tenure, offers 650 courses to students in every county and 10 colleges and universities, Foxley said.

The Utah College of Applied Technology, established under a 2001 law, offers job training courses to more than 15,000 high school students and 45,000 adults every year, Governor's Office data show.

And Leavitt's brainchild Western Governors University has awarded 68 diplomas since December 2000, has 1,400 students and is growing at about 200 a month, WGU reports.

The initiatives represent a fundamental shift for colleges and universities.

"Instead of people coming to where the knowledge is, knowledge is going to where the people are," Leavitt said.

Still, some things never change for college students: money, or lack thereof.

On paper, higher education appears financially better off than it was when Leavitt took office.

State funding has increased from \$478 million in 1993-94 to \$644 million in 2003-2004, reports Dave Buhler, Utah System of Higher Education associate commissioner of public affairs.

Colleges have spent \$1.6 billion on buildings in Leavitt's tenure. About a third of that — \$517 million — came from state funds, the Utah System of Higher Education reports.

Yet overall, higher education's share of the state budget has held steady from 13.3 percent in 1994 to 13.4 percent in 2004, governor's office numbers show.

Still, in budget cutting years, holding the line is a big deal to higher education leaders.

"Several times we were either given less of a cut or held from future cuts," Foxley said, describing Leavitt as a higher education advocate. "When funding was available, he always realized higher education and its tie to the economy. . . . He'd refer to higher education as the economic engine."

But that engine sometimes mows over students, whose pocketbooks have been hit progressively harder since Leavitt took office.

In the 1993-94 school year, students paid, in the form of tuition, 26.9 percent of what it costs to educate them, Utah System of Higher Education data show. This school year, they're shouldering 34.8 percent of those costs.

Part of the problem resulted from the state's economic downturn two years ago. For instance, the "education in general" line item, was \$483.7 million in 2001-2002. It dropped by about \$6.5 million the following year, but recovered \$4.8 million of that in the current year.

The biggest problem is state funds haven't kept pace with enrollment growth, said Buhler. Some 10,000 new students came to colleges and universities without state funds following them, and per-student funding has dropped \$930 in the past five years.

Students have helped take up the slack.

Tuition increased an average 11 percent this school year. Last year's systemwide average hike was 9.8 percent; the year before, 7.2 percent.

By comparison, tuition went up an average 5.5 percent in the 1994-95 school year.

Over the past 10 years, tuition and fees have increased more than 50 percent at the University of Utah and Utah State University, and by 72.5 percent at the rapidly growing Utah Valley State College.

The increases concern Pamela Atkinson, an advocate for low-income residents and former member of the Utah Board of Regents.

"With this last round of tuition increases, I'm afraid people who can't get a decent paying job are not going to be able to finish what they started . . . and drop out of school," she said.

Leavitt says federal and state student aid has increased from \$59 million in 1994 to more than \$94 million in 2002.

But Atkinson says that in good budget times, college presidents and students unsuccessfully urged the state to boost even higher that investment.

SUU's Miller, for instance, believes Utah could have used money from the tobacco settlement funds as a one-time infusion to colleges and universities.

Now, state revenues are down, and competition for student aid and scholarships is up, Atkinson said.

Enrollments, however, continue to rise, but more slowly than in previous years. Enrollments rose this fall by around 1 percent systemwide. Last year, they grew by 4.4 percent.

Tuition increases cannot be laid solely at the governor's feet. Students could have taken action, especially via the ballot box, said Addy Hall, Weber State University Student Association executive vice president.

"I don't think our message is getting across. They're not hearing us, because we're not voting," she said. "We needed to vote more to let them know we're serious, and let them know we're an important part of the people they're going to be taking care of."

Leavitt also happens to be one of the people affected by tuition. "You're talking to a guy who's got four kids in college."

Still, he says Utah's tuition is relatively low compared to other states.

"We've had to fight for every dollar to go to higher ed, and the fact I've been able to hold it essentially harmless during periods when we've had radical and dramatic changes financially, I see that as part of my success. I'm pleased with that."