

Posted on Thursday, November 20, 2008, from the *Miami Herald*

HIGHER EDUCATION

Gov. Charlie Crist backs universities' bid to raise tuition

Gov. Charlie Crist will push for 15 percent tuition increases at state universities, a move that could boost financial aid for the poorest students.

BY JENNIFER LIBERTO AND STEVE BOUSQUET

HERALD/TIMES TALLAHASSEE BUREAU

TALLAHASSEE -- Bowing to the pleas of Florida's cash-starved state universities, Gov. Charlie Crist will announce a plan Thursday to allow all 11 schools to raise tuition up to 15 percent a year.

Crist plans to reverse his stated opposition to higher tuition by asking the Legislature to extend the same 15 percent tuition hike that five of the state's largest universities were allowed to assess this year. The five -- Florida International University, the University of South Florida, the University of Central Florida, the University of Florida and Florida State University -- would be eligible to increase tuition again next year by another 15 percent.

The proposal would greatly increase financial aid to the state's poorest students because 30 percent of the new money raised would be used to lower tuition and fees for low-income students, according to drafts of the plan obtained by the Herald/Times.

The proposal was developed quietly in conversations between the governor's office, the Board of Governors that oversees the state university system, university presidents and the Council of 100, an influential group of business leaders, according to state records.

Many lawmakers, who must approve the plan, knew little about it.

"I know [Crist] is working on something, but I haven't seen the details," said House Speaker Ray Sansom, R-Destin, at a Panhandle retreat with other Republican House members.

Sen. Charlie Justice, D-St. Petersburg, works at the University of South Florida and acknowledges the need for more funding for universities. "We're making it harder for Florida families to afford colleges," he said. "Everyone knows when the economy turns south more and more people head to colleges. This is something we really need to talk about before we pass."

PRESSURES

The proposed tuition changes would shift the burden of paying for the state's higher education system more toward students. Even Bright Futures scholarship recipients, who get state money to attend a state school because of their good grades, would have to pay the higher rates under the proposal.

The tuition hike also would have to be absorbed by those who bought prepaid tuition plans after July 1, 2007, which is similar to the law passed in 2007 that permitted the hike that larger universities have made this year.

Universities are facing unprecedented financial pressures. With tuition rates capped and costs rising, schools have been slashing undergraduate enrollment, cutting academic programs and wiping out degree programs. They've also begun laying off faculty and staff statewide.

Facing another year without salary increases, many top professors are being lured out-of-state.

"This has to be a tough decision, but I think he's making it clear that Florida, in spite of these tough economic times, is finding a way to ensure we have a quality higher education system," said Florida A&M University President James Ammons, whose school would be eligible for higher tuition rates under the plan.

'A HAIL MARY'

The group that lobbies the Legislature on behalf of students, the Florida Student Association, knew about the governor's plan and says students are in a bind.

They're concerned about tuition hikes, but they're also worried about the condition of the higher education system.

"The general sentiment is that tuition can go up. They understand it needs to go up," said Chris Krampert, FSA executive director. "But, it's a Hail Mary giant leap forward, instead of taking a step forward."

Five universities (FIU, USF, UCF, UF, and FSU) got a head start on the tuition hike and will get to keep the 15 percent hike they were allowed to pass this year.

The plan calls for the Board of Governors to delegate the power to each university board of trustees to figure out how much of the tuition hike they plan to charge, the draft memo said. They could raise tuition 15 percent a year, as long as the increase doesn't exceed 40 percent in three years.

LOTTERY MONEY

Tuition at Florida's 11 state universities is among the lowest in the nation, from \$3,400 to about \$4,000 a year for in-state students. The wildly popular Bright Futures scholarship program, which is not based on financial need, is growing faster than the state's ability to pay for it. Bright Futures is supported with state money from the lottery that has seen a drop-off in ticket sales as Florida residents have less discretionary money.

Higher education advocates who have been hearing about such plans on the sidelines say they approve of the move, especially imposing the tuition increases on state-funded Bright Futures scholarships as well.

"I applaud the governor for dealing with this, especially in a tight budget year," said Steve Uhlfedler, a former Florida State University board trustee.

Herald/Times Bureau reporter Alex Leary contributed to this report.

Jennifer Liberto can be reached at liberto@sptimes.com.