Regents to discuss capping tuition

Tuition, fees have doubled at KU, K-State since 2002

By CHRIS GREEN
Harris News Service

TOPEKA — The Kansas Board of Regents could discuss next month whether to cap tuition increases to keep Kansas universities affordable.

Several board members expressed concern Wednesday that costs to students and their parents were increasing too steeply and too rapidly. However, they also worried that any new restrictions on such tuition charges could rob the state’s six public universities of the funding they need to excel.

The board scheduled a discussion of tuition charges for its Feb. 13 and 14 meetings. Board members also invited university leaders to offer their insights on the issue.

“This isn’t about looking back and making judgments,” said Regent Gary Sherrer of Overland Park. “It’s about looking ahead to the future.”

Each May, the state Board of Regents hears tuition and fee proposals from leaders at all six universities. The board then finalizes them the following month, which recently has meant endorsing each university’s proposal.

However, Regent Janie Perkins of Garden City said board members want to look at whether they need to set more definite parameters to guide schools in making their rate proposals.

The move comes after a recent overhaul in the board’s composition. Five new members joined the nine-member board in July after being appointed to their posts by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

Since 2002, tuition and fees at state universities have more than doubled at the University of Kansas and Kansas State University. Increases at the state’s other schools have averaged at least 8 percent a year.

At the same time, student debt among borrowers was 5 percent to 21 percent higher for 2006 graduates than their 2004 counterparts.
Board wants to discuss tuition hikes

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Sherrer said he was concerned tuition hikes were outstripping the ability of citizens to pay, since increases in personal income hasn't risen by the same percentage for most citizens.

However, board members also noted universities face increasing pressure to raise tuition because funding provided by the Kansas Legislature hasn't met rising costs in higher education.

In fact, the state's share of funding college operations has fallen to all-time lows in recent years. At the same time many college leaders say they are struggling to pay competitive salaries to their employees and cover rising energy, health care and other costs.

“I think the Legislature has got to understand that these costs keep going up, and somebody has to pay for it,” said Regent Dan Lykins of Topeka.

In recent years, much of that burden has fallen on students and their parents, some board members admitted.

“It is a tax on kids,” Regent Jill Docking of Wichita said of tuition increases sparked by relatively flat state funding.