

# Think College Costs Too Much? Thank the Government



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

By Arthur F. Kirk Jr.

I am not going to argue that a four-year college education isn't expensive. It is. I won't argue that its return on investment makes it worthwhile, although it surely does. I also cannot argue that increasing the number of administrators doesn't increase the cost of a higher education. It does.

In recent years at Saint Leo University, we have added positions in risk management, internal audit (two), legal compliance, financial-aid regulatory compliance, human resources, accounting, security and safety, athletic training, athletic compliance, and university-accreditation compliance. In every one of these instances, we are generally responding directly or indirectly to federal regulatory mandates, legal trends, insurers' expectations, accreditors' requirements, and so on.

Take internal audit. The federal Sarbanes-Oxley legislation was a reaction to the collapse of the energy-trading behemoth Enron Corporation in 2001 and to legitimate concerns about corporate accounting accuracy, integrity, and boards of directors fulfilling their governance-oversight responsibilities. However, it has driven significant changes in our nonprofit board's concerns, oversight, and actions. The resulting increased financial oversight, internal audit, and risk management are all reasonable and responsible activities—and all require administrative staff and add substantial real costs. Students and parents pay.

Societal, institutional, parental, student, and insurance-company concerns about concussions and other injuries demanded more athletic trainers to evaluate, watch over, and treat collegiate athletes. Baseline concussion tests for all athletes every year before the season are prudent, but also add expense. Having athletic trainers attend to athletes before, during, and after every practice and game is a good thing, but it is costly. The NCAA also expects us to employ a person who does not coach, to ensure compliance with the many NCAA rules. That costs money, too.

Legitimate concerns about keeping every student safe and secure, including complying with the federal Clery Act crime-reporting requirement, are another driver of tuition costs. Recently, President Obama announced his intention to hold colleges more accountable for how they handle allegations of rape on their campuses. This drives increases in security as well as legal and student-life staff. Nothing is free.

Here is our latest one—not driven by law but by federal administrative fiat. It calls for the establishment of a central complaint system for all military and veteran students and requires every institution to identify a single point of contact for all complaints. That person must also document every complaint, record the actions to respond to the complaint and resolve it, as well as the outcome, all subject to federal scrutiny by several agencies. Who will do this work?

I could go on with more examples, but I hope I have made my point. Much, but certainly not all, of the much-maligned "administrative bloat" is driven by external forces, societal demands, and regulations from the federal government, the states, the NCAA, accreditors, and insurers. In addition to state and local laws, higher-education institutions are required to comply with federal laws too numerous to count. The website of the Higher Education Compliance Alliance lists many of them, but there are others.

A simple count does not reflect the complexities institutions face, as the Higher Education Act alone is 900 pages long. Higher education is regulated by every cabinet-level department and numerous subagencies. One small private college documented that 106 employees logged 7,200 hours completing federal compliance forms. Some regulations were promulgated to call us to account for why our tuition costs so much.

Ironic, isn't it?

Let me be clear, not all of the increases in college tuition and administrative bloat are caused by regulation, but some are—and far more than you think. President Obama and members of Congress are promising more regulations and sanctions for colleges that do not control tuition increases.

Saint Leo University's tuition is less than three-quarters the average of private college tuition nationally. Our administrative costs per student are 56 percent of that of our peers, according to the federal government's own data reports. We work hard to keep tuition as low as we can for our students and still meet their needs. We run a lean and efficient administration, but we cannot refuse to comply with expensive regulatory requirements. Many of those making the most noise about higher college costs are causing them. We are accused of "choosing" to add more nonteaching staff. It rarely is a choice.

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