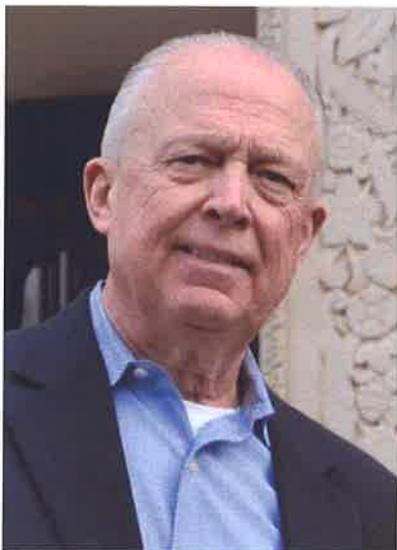


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Guest columnist: As tuition pinches wallets, college travel costs merit scrutiny

By Richard Eckstrom Nov 28, 2018



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The cost of attaining a higher education is a major concern for parents and students in the Palmetto State. And understandably so, as South Carolina now has the nation's ninth-highest tuition bills, according to the most recent annual ranking.

And that doesn't include the ever-increasing student fees – additional charges for such things as parking, student activities, athletic events and use of campus facilities – which aren't included in advertised tuition fees but are nonetheless imposed on students.

Colleges and universities – particularly our state-supported institutions – would do well to keep tuition fees in check by continually evaluating their own expenses and pursuing administrative efficiencies where possible. Their travel budgets might be a good place to start.

In Fiscal Year 2018, which ended June 30, South Carolina's 35 public colleges and universities spent a combined \$56.5 million on airlines, lodging, registration fees, and other travel-related costs. That's 69.4 percent of the \$81.4 million total travel costs for all state agencies.

This information comes from the 2018 Travel Report, which I released earlier this month. My office each year compiles and releases details about state agencies' travel spending as part of our broader fiscal transparency effort, which aims to show taxpayers how public dollars are used.

According to this year's report, the ten highest-spending colleges and universities were:

1. Clemson University: \$16,393,032
2. University of South Carolina: \$12,436,158
3. Medical University of South Carolina: \$6,384,597
4. College of Charleston: \$4,044,853
5. Coastal Carolina University: \$2,356,646
6. Citadel: \$1,383,838
7. Winthrop University: \$1,289,078
8. Francis Marion University: \$858,253
9. USC Upstate: \$699,576
10. Lander University: \$698,041

As these institutions are quick to point out, much of their spending is done with money from sources other than the state's general fund – for example, private grants and sports ticket sales.

Nonetheless, they still receive tens of millions annually from the taxpayers. With many of them lobbying for more year after year, they ought to go the extra mile to demonstrate wise, efficient stewardship of their existing revenue.

And with high tuition and fees putting college out of reach of many families, our institutions of higher education should commit to finding ways to make it more affordable.

Such debate usually centers around increased funding, and at least one bill pending in the General Assembly would do just that – freezing tuition levels and establishing a \$125 million trust fund to supplement schools' revenue. But more money shouldn't be the only option on the table.

There are cost-cutting steps large and small our colleges and universities can take to reduce overhead without compromising the quality of education they provide – if they're willing to do so.

(The 2018 Travel Report is available at cg.sc.gov. Click on "Fiscal Transparency" near the top of the home page, then scroll down to "State Travel Spending Reports."

The report details all travel-related expenditures for each state agency, ranks all agencies in descending order based on their total travel spending, and identifies the names, job titles, and amounts spent by the top 25 travelers in each agency.)

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