



University grad fees often exceed actual costs

By Chase Castle | Daily Herald Staff

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SPRINGFIELD - Thousands of students graduated from Illinois' public universities this spring - the culmination of years of work, countless hours and often sizable expenses, all spent in the name of furthering education.

But a final round of tuition payment isn't the only expense many graduates faced before collecting their diplomas: Roughly half of Illinois' public universities charged students for caps, gowns, tassels and other apparel at higher rates than the original cost to the schools.

State contracts reviewed by the Daily Herald reveal that Northern Illinois University, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Illinois at Springfield and Western Illinois University all charged students this year for graduation apparel at inflated costs. Revenue margins varied from roughly \$6 to \$50, depending on the university attended and degree received. With thousands of students going through commencements, that can add up to substantial amounts for the schools.

At Northern Illinois University, for example, undergraduate students completing their degree paid \$29 for cap and gown rentals through the university, which holds a contract with the Oak Hall Cap and Gown Company of Salem, Va. The unit cost to the university of renting that apparel, however, was about \$11.75, thus generating a \$17.25 profit. Law students at NIU faced pricier fees with a \$75 charge for graduation apparel, while that same apparel originally cost roughly \$23.

Other state universities, such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, have students purchase or rent graduation apparel directly from a designated vendor, instead of through the university.

The examination of graduation fees comes as the state faces a backlog of \$724 million owed to date to Illinois' public colleges and universities, coupled with a state budget deficit of about \$13 billion. Meanwhile, the University of Illinois is preparing for a controversial 9.5 percent tuition increase effective this fall.

State Sen. Martin Sandoval, a Cicero Democrat who's recently been outspoken about higher education costs, said he isn't surprised to learn many universities imposed additional graduation costs on students.

He said higher education institutions shouldn't be allowed to charge students beyond expenses with fixed costs. Too often, he said, universities justify fees by pointing to similar costs at other universities.

"So they set pay, compensation and tuition based on this comparison of whatever everyone else is charging," Sandoval said. "They don't set tuition based upon what their fixed cost of educating an individual is in Illinois. There's a big difference."

Frequently, public and private universities charge several other fees per academic term. University of Illinois at Springfield, for example, charged students taking on-campus classes fulfilling the minimum full-time credit requirements almost \$1,700 over two semesters for various fees. That includes a general fee, service fee, health fee and academic facility maintenance assessment, in addition to tuition costs.

The University of Illinois at Springfield also charged exiting students a \$55 graduation contract fee, which is separate from optional cap and gown purchases. A campus spokesman said the graduation contract fee

covers costs related to awarding the degrees, such as diplomas, diploma covers and mailings, and costs related to the commencement ceremony such as facility rental, security, printing costs and interpretive services.

Brad Hoey, spokesman for Northern Illinois University, said its cap and gown rental prices, too, account not only for graduates' apparel, but also for peripheral expenses related to commencement ceremonies and printing costs.

"All that goes to the integrated graduation fee," Hoey said.

As for law students' graduation rates, Hoey said the law college traditionally contracts for a commencement speaker - a feature missing from undergraduate graduations, he said.

Hoey said that although attendance at graduation ceremonies is optional, students will be charged for those costs regardless of whether they go.

Sandoval said universities rarely lay out empirical evidence for those fees, however, which otherwise would be paid for through tuition.

"So why does there have to be a handling fee on vendors' supplies?" Sandoval said. "Why do their services have to go charge fees?"

Bill Burton, spokesman for the University of Illinois at Chicago, said the school's Retail Operations department sets students' graduation apparel prices. Those prices range between about \$23 and \$64, with markups by the university of roughly \$6 to \$20.

Burton said any increase in the cost of apparel passed on to students is small considering the expenses of distributing items through the university's bookstore.

"A normal retail markup is about 50 percent," Burton said. "So our markup is minimal and barely covers our costs. It's essentially a break-even proposition for us," Burton said.

Burton said purchasing the apparel and reselling it to students is less expensive than renting. Plus, students are allowed to borrow apparel from other graduates who don't have conflicting commencement schedules, he said. Burton also noted that no one is required to pay the fees to participate in the ceremony if he or she is unable to take part, or simply doesn't want to.

"Many people either can't go or choose not to participate," Burton said.

As part of a larger effort to reform Illinois' public universities, Sen. Sandoval said he's convening a group of lawmakers as "the Subcommittee on Containing Costs and Lowering Tuition at Public Universities." Sandoval said the group will meet with board members and trustees from Illinois' public universities, and could assemble as soon as next month.

Editor's note: Chase Castle recently completed a graduate degree program from the University of Illinois' Springfield campus.

Graduation fees

Many of the state's universities charge students for graduation apparel at rates higher than the schools pay. Here's a look at the disparity in approximate costs at select schools.

	Undergrad	Graduate	Ph.D	Law
Northern Illinois University				
What school pays	\$11.75	\$21.95		\$23.01
What students pay	\$29.00	\$35.00		\$75.00
Difference	+\$17.25	+\$13.05		+\$51.99
Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville				
What school pays	15.02	\$38.40		
What students pay	\$26.95	51.95		
Difference	+\$11.93	+\$13.55		
University of Illinois at Chicago				
What school pays	\$22.85	\$42.95	\$64.15 or \$60.15	
What students pay	\$28.95	\$54.95	\$82.95	
Difference	+\$6.10	+\$12.00	+\$18.80 or \$22.80	
University of Illinois at Springfield				
What school pays	\$17.95	\$40.05	\$49.05	
What students pay	\$31.00	\$69.00	\$49.05	
Difference	+\$13.05	+\$28.95	0	
Western Illinois University				
What school pays	\$17.00	\$18.50	\$53.00	
What students pay	\$30.00	\$32.50	\$75.00	
Difference	+\$13.00	+\$14.00	+\$22.00	

Source: University graduation apparel contracts and fees obtained via the Freedom of Information Act.