

Defining “Full-Time” Tuition and Fees at Public Flagship Universities and Community Colleges

November 2013

Several national reports each year calculate national average tuition and fees. According to the College Board’s [Trends in College Pricing](#), the best known of these, the average full-time tuition and fees at a public four-year university in the U.S. was \$8,893 in 2013-14. At public two-year colleges, it was \$3,264. Other often-cited reports with slightly different national average calculations include the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) [“First Look” report](#) on student charges, and the Washington State Achievement Council’s [National Tuition and Fees Report](#).

But “full-time” for tuition purposes doesn’t always mean the same thing. In the College Board’s survey, it means the cost of 30 semester credits per year. To get a bachelor’s degree, a student would normally pay those fees for four years. For NCES, however, the minimum is 24 credits per year, depending on what an institution determines is typical for its students. At many community colleges and open-access four-year institutions, for example, 12 hours is a “full-time” course load, and institutions report accordingly. In those cases, students would have to pay the “full-time” rate for five years to complete a bachelor’s degree. So even institutions that have comparable published “full-time” rates in IPEDS could be quite different in terms of the total sticker price of a college degree.

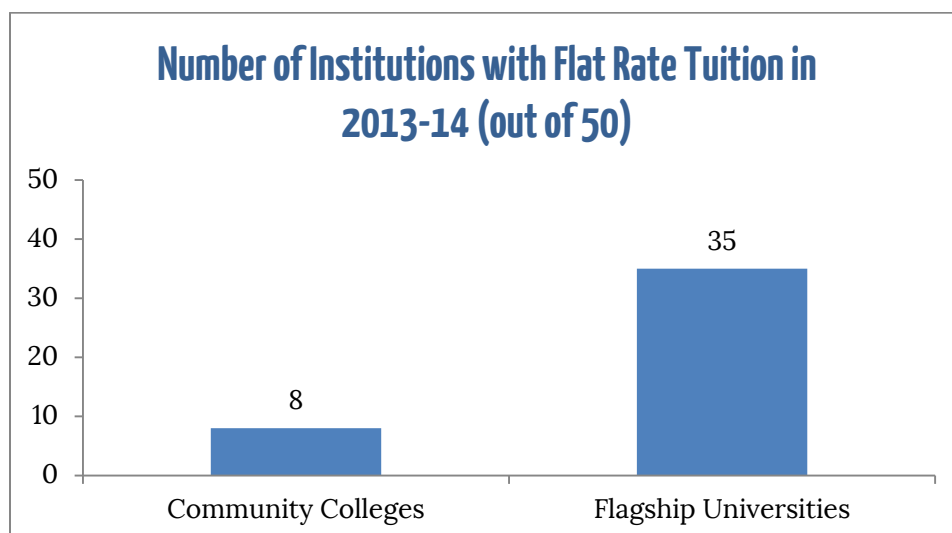
There are no published data nationally on the structure of tuition and fee charges, so we researched websites of 50 public flagship universities and 50 randomly selected community colleges—one from each sector in each state—to get a sense of how charges for “full-time” might vary from one institution to another. Tuition structure can also provide incentives or disincentives for “full-time” students to take 15 hours, the normal course load to complete a degree on time.

Since a few institutions vary their charges by student class level or discipline, we decided to search for what an in-state freshman majoring in liberal arts would pay taking 12 compared to 15 credits per term. Here’s what we found:

- 1) At most (35 out of 50) public flagship universities, “full-time” students pay a fixed rate, so there is no additional out-of-pocket cost to enroll in 15 hours instead of 12.

Variously called “block,” “flat,” or “plateau” tuition, this provides the generally middle-income student bodies at these institutions with a strong incentive to enroll in as many courses as they can manage.

- 2) At most (42 out of 50) community colleges, on the other hand, tuition is charged per credit, so students taking 15 hours pay more out of pocket than those who take 12. This creates a disincentive for the generally lower-income students at these institutions to take more than the 12 hours they need to be eligible for maximum federal and state financial aid awards.
- 3) At 6 out of the 15 flagships and 7 out of the 32 community colleges that charged more for 15 hours than for 12, the additional tuition and fees were “discounted”. These institutions typically had one set of required fees based on per-semester attendance and another set based on per-credit enrollment. At these institutions, there is an incentive for students who can afford it to take more courses at the “discounted rate.” There is usually no financial aid available for the additional fees, however, so low-income students may be less apt to take care of the “sale.”
- 4) This information was very difficult to find. A native English-speaking research analyst with a graduate degree often struggled to find and interpret basic tuition and fee information.
- 5) Institutions have highly variable definitions of “tuition” and “required fees”. Some have an all-in-one price, while others have a catalog of itemized fees that rival a typical cell phone bill. The major national surveys mentioned above all have fairly consistent definitions that standardize these into one “tuition and fees” number, but institutions’ own sites often follow their own bureaucratic and confusing logic.



Comment: Changing Tuition Structure as a Tuition Increase

Institutions sometimes change their tuition structure as a revenue-raising tool. Those with “flat” tuition will say—justifiably—that they are getting no revenue for some of their courses and move to linear tuition, which is the equivalent of imposing a 25% tuition increase only on the students who are actually on-track to graduation. Those with linear tuition will lobby move to a flat rate as an incentive for students to take more courses—again, justifiably so. They will typically set the new rate at the level formerly charged for 15 hours. In either case, institutions can claim not to have raised tuition by altering the definition of “full-time”. In the first case, tuition did not go up for students taking 12 hours. In the second case, it did not go up for students taking 15.

In paying attention only to the annual rates of increase in “full-time” tuition, it is easy to miss the importance of tuition structure and the potential impact on students incentives and ability to complete their degrees on time. Governing boards and education reporters should recognize that changing tuition structure is a tuition increase for some students, but not for others.

While tuition increases are sometimes required, it is important to recognize the strategic value of tuition structure. If a tuition increase is necessary, then moving from linear to flat tuition can be a way to reduce barriers to completion, especially in the vast majority of states that do not provide additional financial aid to students who take more than 12 credits. Pell Grants are no help here either. But when institutions move the other way, from flat to linear tuition, they create new financial barriers to on-time degree completion.

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TUITION AND REQUIRED FEES, RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATES, MAIN CAMPUSES, ENTERING FALL 2013, LIBERAL ARTS & SCIENCES MAJOR

State	Name	Sector	Calendar System	Tuition at		15 credit premium	Flat (premium <5% or Linear)
				12	15		
AK	Prince William Sound Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,889	\$ 2,330	23%	LINEAR
AK	University of Alaska, Fairbanks	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,228	\$ 3,766	17%	LINEAR
AL	Lawson State Community College, Birmingham Campus	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,690	\$ 2,110	25%	LINEAR
AL	University of Alabama	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,725	\$ 4,725	0%	FLAT
AR	University of Arkansas, Fayetteville	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,301	\$ 4,083	24%	LINEAR
AR	Pulaski Technical College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,437	\$ 1,782	24%	LINEAR
AZ	Gateway Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,287	\$ 1,605	25%	LINEAR
AZ	Arizona State University	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,001	\$ 5,001	0%	FLAT
CA	University of California, Los Angeles	Four-Year	Quarter	\$ 4,743	\$ 4,743	0%	FLAT
CA	City College of San Francisco	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 569	\$ 707	24%	LINEAR
CO	University of Colorado Boulder	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 7,669	\$ 7,861	3%	FLAT
CO	Front Range Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,753	\$ 2,178	24%	LINEAR
CT	Gateway Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,893	\$ 1,893	0%	FLAT
CT	University of Connecticut, Storrs	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,628	\$ 4,628	0%	FLAT
DE	University of Delaware	Four-Year	Four-one-four plan	\$ 6,056	\$ 6,056	0%	FLAT
DE	Delaware Technical Community College-Stanton/Wilmington	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,627	\$ 1,650	1%	FLAT
FL	Tallahassee Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,186	\$ 1,482	25%	LINEAR
FL	University of Florida, Gainesville	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 2,505	\$ 3,132	25%	LINEAR
GA	Georgia Institute of Technology, Main Campus	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,761	\$ 5,761	0%	FLAT
GA	Atlanta Technical College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,272	\$ 1,527	20%	LINEAR
HI	University of Hawaii, Manoa	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,952	\$ 4,952	0%	FLAT
HI	Kapiolani Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,302	\$ 1,620	24%	LINEAR
IA	Iowa State University	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,863	\$ 3,863	0%	FLAT
IA	Des Moines Area Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,632	\$ 2,040	25%	LINEAR
ID	University of Idaho	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,869	\$ 6,169	5%	LINEAR
ID	College of Southern Idaho	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,320	\$ 1,650	25%	LINEAR
IL	College of DuPage	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,680	\$ 2,100	25%	LINEAR
IL	University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,917	\$ 5,917	0%	FLAT
IN	Ivy Tech Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,466	\$ 1,817	24%	LINEAR
IN	Indiana University, Bloomington	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,459	\$ 4,459	0%	FLAT
KS	Johnson County Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,020	\$ 1,275	25%	LINEAR
KS	University of Kansas, Lawrence	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,591	\$ 4,379	22%	LINEAR
KY	University of Kentucky	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,532	\$ 5,532	0%	FLAT
KY	Jefferson Community and Technical College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,768	\$ 2,200	24%	LINEAR
LA	Delgado Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,546	\$ 1,842	19%	LINEAR
LA	Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,917	\$ 3,940	1%	FLAT

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MA	University of Massachusetts Amherst	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 6,629	\$ 6,629	0%	FLAT
MA	Bunker Hill Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,494	\$ 2,917	17%	LINEAR
MD	Harford Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,296	\$ 1,621	25%	LINEAR
MD	University of Maryland, College Park	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,581	\$ 4,581	0%	FLAT
ME	University of Maine	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,463	\$ 5,300	19%	LINEAR
ME	York County Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,636	\$ 1,958	20%	LINEAR
MI	Oakland Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 952	\$ 1,181	24%	LINEAR
MI	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	Four-Year	Trimester	\$ 6,571	\$ 6,571	0%	FLAT
MN	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 6,030	\$ 6,030	0%	FLAT
MN	Century College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,137	\$ 2,671	25%	LINEAR
MO	University of Missouri-Columbia	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 2,987	\$ 3,847	29%	LINEAR
MO	Saint Louis Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,176	\$ 1,470	25%	LINEAR
MS	Hinds Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,080	\$ 1,080	0%	FLAT
MS	University of Mississippi, Oxford	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,400	\$ 3,400	0%	FLAT
MT	Flathead Valley Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,643	\$ 1,910	16%	LINEAR
MT	University of Montana, Missoula Campus	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,022	\$ 3,022	0%	FLAT
NC	Davidson County Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 933	\$ 1,147	23%	LINEAR
NC	University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,170	\$ 4,170	0%	FLAT
ND	North Dakota State College of Science	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,717	\$ 2,147	25%	LINEAR
ND	University of North Dakota, Grand Forks	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,754	\$ 3,754	0%	FLAT
NE	University of Nebraska-Lincoln	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,149	\$ 3,797	21%	LINEAR
NE	Metropolitan Community College Area	Two-Year	Quarter	\$ 696	\$ 870	25%	LINEAR
NH	University of New Hampshire-Main Campus	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 9,388	\$ 9,388	0%	FLAT
NH	NHTI-Concord's Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,790	\$ 3,480	25%	LINEAR
NJ	Brookdale Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,719	\$ 2,148	25%	LINEAR
NJ	Rutgers University - New Brunswick	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,513	\$ 5,513	0%	FLAT
NM	University of New Mexico, Main Campus	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 2,873	\$ 3,223	12%	LINEAR
NM	Central New Mexico Community College	Two-Year	Trimester	\$ 660	\$ 660	0%	FLAT
NV	University of Nevada, Las Vegas	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 2,795	\$ 3,402	22%	LINEAR
NV	Truckee Meadows Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,080	\$ 1,350	25%	LINEAR
NY	CUNY LaGuardia Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,192	\$ 2,283	4%	FLAT
NY	Buffalo State SUNY, Buffalo	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,275	\$ 5,275	0%	FLAT
OH	Cuyahoga Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,275	\$ 1,518	19%	LINEAR
OH	Ohio State University, Main Campus	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,018	\$ 5,018	0%	FLAT
OK	Tulsa Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,280	\$ 1,600	25%	LINEAR
OK	University of Oklahoma, Norman	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,544	\$ 3,544	0%	FLAT

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OR	Portland Community College	Two-Year	Quarter	\$ 1,134	\$ 1,417	25%	LINEAR
OR	University of Oregon, Eugene	Four-Year	Quarter	\$ 2,702	\$ 3,254	20%	LINEAR
PA	Harrisburg Area Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,118	\$ 2,648	25%	LINEAR
PA	Penn State, State College	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 8,516	\$ 10,526	24%	LINEAR
RI	Community College of Rhode Island	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,975	\$ 1,975	0%	FLAT
RI	University of Rhode Island	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 14,086	\$ 14,086	0%	FLAT
SC	University of South Carolina-Columbia	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 6,995	\$ 6,995	0%	FLAT
SC	Trident Technical College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,911	\$ 2,385	25%	LINEAR
SD	Southeast Technical Institute	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,316	\$ 2,895	25%	LINEAR
SD	University of South Dakota, Vermillion	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,209	\$ 4,011	25%	LINEAR
TN	Southwest Tennessee Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,924	\$ 2,731	42%	LINEAR
TN	University of Tennessee, Knoxville	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,597	\$ 5,597	0%	FLAT
TX	Lone Star College System	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 704	\$ 872	24%	LINEAR
TX	University of Texas at Austin	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 4,673	\$ 4,673	0%	FLAT
UT	Salt Lake Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,671	\$ 1,671	0%	FLAT
UT	University of Utah, Salt Lake City	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,141	\$ 3,729	19%	LINEAR
VA	Wytheville Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,596	\$ 1,995	25%	LINEAR
VA	University of Virginia, Charlottesville	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 6,233	\$ 6,233	0%	FLAT
VT	University of Vermont	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 9,214	\$ 9,214	0%	FLAT
VT	Community College of Vermont	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,849	\$ 3,545	24%	LINEAR
WA	University of Washington, Seattle Campus	Four-Year	Quarter	\$ 4,133	\$ 4,133	0%	FLAT
WA	Clark College	Two-Year	Quarter	\$ 1,217	\$ 1,385	14%	LINEAR
WI	University of Wisconsin, Waukesha	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 2,546	\$ 2,546	0%	FLAT
WI	University of Wisconsin, Madison	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 5,202	\$ 5,202	0%	FLAT
WV	West Virginia University	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 3,228	\$ 3,228	0%	FLAT
WV	Blue Ridge Community and Technical College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,613	\$ 2,003	24%	LINEAR
WY	University of Wyoming	Four-Year	Semester	\$ 1,912	\$ 2,236	17%	LINEAR
WY	Laramie County Community College	Two-Year	Semester	\$ 1,320	\$ 1,470	11%	LINEAR