

# Students cover tax cuts

By [Kurt Hochenauer](#)

Oklahoma college students should expect another increase in tuition costs this fall, in part, because the state Legislature will probably not stop what University of Oklahoma President David L. Boren has called an “irresponsible” tax cut.

Boren reportedly made the remark in early May at a meeting with students and faculty in which he also said OU students should expect some type of “modest” tuition hike this coming fall.

The word “irresponsible” to describe the pending income tax cut on Jan. 1, 2012, is probably an understatement, but Boren deserves credit for speaking up. Even as state legislators cut higher education next fiscal year, they will apparently hand out more money to the state’s wealthiest citizens when the income tax rate falls again from 5.5 to 5.25 percent. As college students scrimp, work and borrow or simply dropout, Oklahoma’s richest citizens pocket the cash created from students’ hardship.

According to the Oklahoma Policy Institute, the tax cut will reduce revenues by \$38 million for the 2012 fiscal year. Citing an analysis by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, the OK Policy blog noted, “The top 20 percent of Oklahomans take home almost (three-fourths) of the tax cut. More than a third of that goes to the top 1 percent. The bottom 60 percent of Oklahomans together receive only 9 percent of the benefit.”

To paraphrase Oklahoma’s own Will Rogers, the rich get richer and college students, among others, get the bill.

After years of rising tuition, the state Regents for Higher Education, along with eight college presidents, decided to freeze tuition costs for the 2009-10 school year. But then economic conditions worsened, causing state revenues to plummet. When revenues rose again, tuition rates didn’t return to pre-downturn levels partially because of income tax cuts passed by the Legislature.

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The Jan. 1 tax cut is automatically going into effect because revenues rose by 4 percent over last year, but the increase is based on post-downturn levels and is hardly an indicator of bountiful times in Oklahoma. Federal stimulus money for education helped for two years, but that money’s gone. Now higher education will face a 5.8 percent cut next year, according to a recently announced state budget agreement.

It’s probably a given most Oklahoma college presidents this coming school year have no choice but to consider raising tuition, and, hopefully, the hikes will be small and affordable for most students. Oklahoma college students and parents have gotten a bad deal over the last few years, with the exception of the 2009-10 school year. It’s really the worst of times, financially, to be a college student in this state.

But the state’s college presidents could do something else. Just like they did in 2009, they could come together again and this time join Boren in calling the new tax cut irresponsible. They could also more aggressively, as a group, assert the importance of higher education in a state with low college graduation rates when compared to the nation.

They should remind everyone of the importance of knowledge and critical inquiry, and make sure the doors of academia remain open to Oklahomans thirsting to learn, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

That’s a message that needs to be repeated by faculty and students as well.

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