

*Quoted from FoxNews on July 1, 2015 at 7:57am*

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## Washington state agrees to cut public universities' tuition by 15-20 percent

Published July 01, 2015

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SEATTLE – A decision this week to cut tuition for Washington state's public universities by 15 to 20 percent over the next two years is a rare move that national experts believe could influence other states as they come out from under the recession.

"Tuition rollbacks are very rare. It will be interesting to see if other states follow Washington's lead," said Thomas L. Harnisch, director of state relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Although many states have frozen college tuition in the years since approving big increases during the recession, only Minnesota also has passed a tuition cut. The Minnesota Legislature approved a 1 percent tuition cut next year just for community college students for fall 2016, but four-year universities are allowed to increase tuition in Minnesota at the same time.

Private colleges across the nation also are starting to experiment with tuition decreases, but they have a different budget model and are more dependent on donations than many state universities.

Harnisch said he's never seen anything like the Washington plan in the eight years he has been tracking college tuition nationally. Neither has Dustin Weeden, education policy specialist at the National Council of State Legislatures.

"Tuition freezes are much more common," Weeden said. "You'd have to go back before the recession to find any other examples."

The Washington Legislature approved a new two-year state budget on Monday that would cut tuition at all of the state's four year colleges and universities by 15 to 20 percent over the next two years, while increasing state dollars going to higher education. Community college students will see tuition go down 5 percent next year.

The state budget and the tuition-policy proposal both await the governor's signature.

Since the recession began, Washington state has been one of the top 10 states for both tuition increases and decreases in state dollars going to higher education, Harnisch said. He called the Legislature's plan a step in a positive direction, but he warned parents and optimists to remember that this is a short-term, one-budget cycle solution so far.

"The key question is whether this is a short-term or long-term commitment to college affordability," Harnisch said.

Washington state Sen. Andy Hill said the tuition policy bill makes a long-term commitment by limiting future tuition increases to the rate of growth in median income.

"Lowering tuition is a great step in providing crucial relief to American families," said Hill, R-Redmond, noting that college students in Washington are graduating with an average of \$25,000 in student loan debt. "We think it has great economic impacts going forward."

The tuition cut was a Republican legislative priority this year that Hill said has been wildly popular.

The leader of the University of Washington also expressed enthusiasm for the tuition cut that will give her students a 5 percent break next fall and another 10 percent the following year. "The lowering of tuition for resident undergraduates is great news for them and their parents," UW interim President Ana Mari Cauce said.

In-state tuition at the University of Washington would go from \$10,740 this past year to \$10,203 this fall and \$9,140 in fall 2016.

Cauce expressed hope, however, that the Legislature would not take tuition up and down over the coming years. She also cautioned parents not to expect tuition to keep going down and to continue to save with increases in mind.