

Think Tuition Is Rising Fast? Try Room And Board



Universities can have a hard time resisting the lure of luxury, which keeps room and board prices rising.

LA Johnson/NPR

Valerie Inniss took out \$11,500 in student loans this year to pay for the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

None of it was for tuition.

The 21-year-old is on a four-year, full-tuition scholarship, won on the strength of her high school test scores. And she qualifies for the maximum federal Pell Grant — \$5,730 — for low-income students.

But that and a campus job were still not enough to cover all her other costs and fees, from health care to books. The biggest expense? Nearly \$11,000 for room and board, a charge that's risen 15 percent since she started college four years ago.

That breaks down to about \$24 a day for food on the cheapest meal plan — an amount that's twice what [the government says](#) the average American spends per day on food. To share a room will cost \$786 a month, which isn't that far below the median monthly rent for an entire apartment or house in America — [\\$904 a month](#).

"I hate it. I absolutely hate it," Inniss says. "But there's nothing I can do about it because I value the education I'm getting here. It's a risk I'm taking."

In addition to steadily raising tuition, but with much less notice, public four-year universities have increased their charges for room and board by 9 percent above inflation in the past five years, [according to the College Board](#). At private colleges, the price has gone up 6 percent above inflation.

Without the inflation adjustment, room and board fees at public colleges and universities have spiked by more than 20 percent since 2009. At private institutions, they're up 17 percent.

At public universities, that's as fast as the increase for tuition, which is up [21 percent in the same period](#). At private colleges, it's even faster; there, tuition has grown 13 percent.

"This is the untold story," says Richard Vedder, director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. "We focus on tuition but we should look at other costs, too," he adds, including the cost of room and board, which students in many remote university towns, including Amherst, have few choices but to pay.

Private colleges also commonly compel students to live and dine on campus, especially during the first year or two. Or they're located in communities so far-flung that there aren't many viable off-campus options. Even if there are, more and more public universities are requiring at least freshmen to live in dorms and eat in dining halls.

"I hate to use 'ripping students off.' But they're using their monopoly position to disguise the true cost of the price of college," said Vedder, who is also an economist at Ohio University. "One way is to make students pay higher room-and-board charges."

Room-and-board fees have been increasing at a time when public universities are being starved for funds by state legislatures while also being pressed by families to slow the increase in tuition.

"One way to make tuition prices go up more slowly is to make room and board go up more rapidly," said [Sandy Baum](#), a researcher of higher-education finances at the Urban Institute and a professor of education at George Washington University.

It's impossible to determine whether colleges and universities are applying revenue from their room-and-board fees toward their general operating costs. But one clue that they are can be found in federal data showing that private, nonprofit universities collectively took in [\\$15.5 billion in "auxiliary revenues"](#) — the category under which the room-and-board fees fall — but used only [\\$14.9 billion for "auxiliary enterprise expenditures."](#)

That leaves \$600 million in revenues that exceeded expenses.

Public universities [collected \\$24.3 billion](#) from auxiliary enterprises, and [spent \\$22.2 billion](#), leaving \$2.1 billion.

UMass says it isn't taking room-and-board fees to subsidize its other costs, though a [budget document](#) shows that auxiliary revenues throughout the UMass system last year exceeded expenditures by \$76 million.

Spokesman Ed Blaguszewski said what students pay for room and board is used only for housing and food, and none of the money goes into general operating funds.

Other forces, Blaguszewski said, are driving up room-and-board costs. Unionized food-service and dormitory employees, for example, negotiated annual raises of 3 percent. That alone is greater than the inflation rate. Most residential buildings are also more than 40 years old, he added, and the university borrowed to pay for repairs and new construction and has to pay interest on the debt. And UMass has adopted "more

sustainable" practices, such as buying locally sourced food, which are more expensive.

Demands for gourmet food and luxury accommodations are also fueling room-and-board costs at many institutions, experts say.

Ranked by the Princeton Review as having the [second-best campus food in the country](#), UMass employs award-winning chefs who prepare restaurant-style dishes. Dining halls are regularly open until midnight, and till 2 a.m. during exam periods.

"Maybe I'm ungrateful. But I don't think it's worth the money," said Inniss, who must foot the bill for this with student loans.

Other universities are going in the opposite direction.

Purdue, in Indiana, is one of the very few universities in the nation not to raise room-and-board charges in the past three years. Beth McCuskey, the vice provost who oversees housing and food there, said she's been able to cut costs by reducing the number of managers and forcing all five dining halls to use the same recipes.

"In the 1990s, we gave flexibility to the dining courts and everyone had their own chili and mac and cheese recipe," she said. "Now we're ordering more of the same kind of bean," and that cuts down on procurement costs, especially for a large university like Purdue, which feeds 12,000 students every day.

Purdue has even eliminated trays. "You're less likely to pile things on a plate," said McCuskey. "It's helped us with food waste."

McCuskey centralized management of the dormitories, no longer hiring a separate manager for each one. But, she noted, Purdue is in a better position than other schools to keep housing costs down today, because it reinvested in its buildings in the past and set aside 10 percent a year for upkeep.

"A lot of dormitories were built in the 1960s and they all became antiquated at once," she said. "In the last 20 years, universities had to refurbish and build new. That put strains on the budget."

McCuskey, who also serves as the vice president of the [Association of College and University Housing Officers International](#), said she's lucky not to have the high levels of debt service that many other colleges have — which portend continued faster-than-inflation increases in room-and-board costs.

Resisting the lure of luxury keeps prices down, too.

"There's been an arms race with housing. In the past, we got caught up with it too," she said, referring to a dormitory at Purdue with private rooms and granite countertops. "It is very costly when you have one bathroom per person."

Inniss, the UMass senior, doesn't live in a fancy single, but she still expects her room-and-board loans to grow even larger.

The university has already announced next year's room-and-board fees. At a time when inflation is below 1 percent, they'll go up an additional 5 percent, to \$11,504.

This story was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. [Read more about higher education.](#)