



If tuition increases were a tax hike they'd be so massive no politician would be caught so much as thinking about them, let alone supporting them. Due in large part to New Mexico's budget cuts to higher education over the last six years, tuition and fees have increased by 46 percent at 4-year public universities and by 34 percent at 2-year colleges. Now we get the news that students at the University of New Mexico will see another increase of about $280 in their tuition and fees next year.

That may not seem like a huge amount to some, but it's enormous when you look at it this way: If the average New Mexico adult was expected to pay an extra $280 a year in gross receipts taxes, it would be equivalent to a 22 percent tax increase! Can you imagine any lawmaker wanting to raise anyone's tax by 22 percent? Yet, since it's not a tax (and college students aren't a huge voting bloc anyway), apparently it's OK.

This increase is even bigger when you consider that some students must finance their tuition with student loans, which they will pay back with interest over many years. Once again, we've saddled our students with debt in order to preserve precious tax cuts for the rich and corporations. It's also not helpful that those big tax cuts have yet to produce any jobs, so many of those who do finish college here are forced to go elsewhere to find decent employment.

When speaking in public, the Governor never mentions tuition increases but she does often mention the dozens of tax cuts she has championed. Those tax cuts have cost the state hundreds of millions of dollars and forced big cuts to higher education. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities says New Mexico has cut higher education funding by more than 32 percent since the start of the recession. That's the seventh largest cut in the nation—and since that measure was taken, another $20 million has been cut from next year's budget.

So while Governor Susana Martinez has pledged no new taxes, her policies have forced huge tuition increases on an already struggling group of young New Mexicans. As a result, student loan debt is skyrocketing and New Mexico now has the highest rate of default on student loans. In addition, enrollment at many public institutions is down.

By Bill Jordan

NM Voices for Children