

Opinion

# “No College Kid Needs a Water Park to Study,” *New York Times*, 010918



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Photo



Students at Missouri State University’s aquatic center in 2014. Credit Dan Gill for *The New York Times*

In a competition to woo students, public universities are increasingly offering lavish amenities that have nothing to do with education.

The [latest trend](#) is lazy rivers, which have been installed at several big institutions, including the Universities of Alabama, Iowa and Missouri. Last year, Louisiana State University topped them all with a 536-foot-long [“leisure” river](#) in the shape of the letters “LSU,” part of an \$85 million renovation and expansion of its gym. It was L.S.U. students who footed the bill.

At a time when college has never been more expensive, this is the last thing students should be paying for. According to the College Board, tuition and fees at public four-year institutions grew [more than 60 percent over the past 10 years](#). State budgets for higher education have been slashed, and students have to make up the difference.

In the case of L.S.U., the lazy river was financed entirely by student fees, an addendum to their annual tuition. [According to the Chronicle of Higher Education](#), over the past five years, those fees increased by 60 percent, nearly triple the amount L.S.U. students paid in 2000.

Tuition and fee hikes at public universities don’t come out of nowhere. Each has to be approved by a school’s governing board, whose trustees are typically appointed by the governor. Ensuring affordable, quality education is an essential part of trustees’ responsibility, but unfortunately often not part of their practice.

Trustees of public universities are stewards of a public trust that rests nobly on the notion that an enlightened citizenry is vital to a democratic society. They have a fiduciary duty to represent the citizens and taxpayers who support public institutions of higher education, as well as the students who attend them. But even though the best interests of students and taxpayers revolve around college access, affordability and graduation outcomes, too often presidents and boards are more focused on the rankings, reputation and popularity of the institution itself.

In my career as the president of two state universities and a consultant to nearly 50 higher-education institutions, I’ve observed dozens of college presidents skillfully co-opt their governing boards into approving costly projects that make schools look more attractive. (Of course, every college president has to increase costs sometimes. But the goal is to make sure it is necessary, while keeping expenses as low as possible for students.)

Trustees, who typically meet four to eight times each year, are entertained as if they are visiting heads of state, flattered for their service and financial contributions to the institution. College presidents sweeten requests for new buildings and research centers, as well as additional student affairs programming, with cleverly branded words like “promise” and “excellence.”

What board would want to withhold promise and excellence from its beloved student body?

College presidents also tranquilize trustees into agreement with impossibly large volumes of reading material. Trustees get binders full of documentation about institutional successes that are padded with expensive plans for increasing growth and reputation. Most come away impressed by their president's expertise and vision and assured that — thanks to their efforts — the university is on the right track.

The unfortunate truth is that while most college presidents care deeply about their institution's success, an important part of their job is to shake free more resources. They seldom initiate serious campaigns to contain costs.

This means it falls on trustees to be better prepared to help challenge costly proposals that don't add educational value. When it comes to state schools, the states themselves should educate trustees to understand their responsibilities to the citizenry and students. Training on big-picture issues and higher-education trends, such as the financial trade-off between instruction and research, the costs of intercollegiate athletics, and the expansion of amenities, would help trustees develop courage to ask college presidents probing questions that look beyond institutional narratives and cherry-picked rhetoric.

Our nation's governors must also play a role. As they appoint public university trustees, they can and should mandate training to make university boards responsible to taxpayers and students. I don't mean to imply that trustees should devote themselves to ritual opposition to presidents, who usually possess an unmatched understanding of the institutions they lead.

But presidents are not infallible.

James V. Koch, a member of the board of Partners for College Affordability and Public Trust, served as president of the University of Montana and Old Dominion University.