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IN RACE FOR STUDENTS, COLLEGES OFFER TO MATCH TUITION AT RIVAL SCHOOLS

Price-match guarantee, a sales tactic borrowed from retailers, illustrates how fiercely competitive higher education has become

By Melissa Korn
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Escalating the heated battle for students, some private colleges are offering to match public in-state tuition.

Oglethorpe University near Atlanta will match the tuition of any state flagship university for high-achieving students, and Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh said last week it will charge Pennsylvania residents the same price as local public universities, plus a \$3,000 scholarship to boot.

The discounts aren't limited to private schools. Public universities in Michigan, South Dakota and Nebraska now let students from other states pay as if they were locals. The University of Maine in Orono matches neighbors' in-state rates. Public schools regularly charge two or three times as much – or more – for non-residents.

Some colleges, facing dwindling populations of local high school graduates, are motivated to attract students from across the country. Others are battling the perception they aren't affordable or just looking to boost their academic profiles. Schools are getting the word out via billboards and social-media campaigns.

The price-match guarantee, a sales tactic borrowed from retailers, illustrates how fiercely competitive higher education has become. It also adds to the confusion over how much college really costs, especially at private schools. Although the pricing campaigns suggest major savings, already generous financial aid packages mean the net price for many students won't change by much.

Beginning next fall, Oglethorpe will match in-state tuition at flagship public universities in the home states of students with a GPA of at least 3.5 and minimum 1250 SAT or 26 ACT score.

President Lawrence Schall says the aim is to dispel myths about the affordability of a private-school education and appeal to more high-achieving students. Oglethorpe's published tuition and fees are \$39,830 this year, but scholarship programs mean students generally pay far less. The average net price for tuition and fees is \$13,700.

"It is about growing the top of the class," Dr. Schall said. The school now enrolls about 25 percent of all students it admits, but its yield hovers between 10 percent and 15 percent for those in the top academic ranks.

Oglethorpe, whose overall tuition revenue already has been rising, is also trying to increase enrollment more, across the board. Most of its students come from Georgia, Tennessee and Florida; the current first-year class hails from 17 states.

Listed in-state tuition and fees at the University of Georgia and University of Florida – \$11,830 and \$6,380 respectively – are below Oglethorpe’s net price figure so if enrollment from those states continues to dominate, the school’s budget could take a hit. If more new students come from New Hampshire, where flagship tuition and fees run \$18,499, it could be a boon.

Enrollment gains that follow big announcements aren’t always sustained, says Nathan Mueller, a principal at EAB, a consulting firm that helps schools assess enrollment strategy. “The interest seems to cool” once schools see analyses about the programs’ potential success, he says.

The University of Nebraska at Kearney started offering in-state tuition to students from Colorado and Kansas this year, trying to offset a steady 1 percent to 2 percent annual undergraduate enrollment decline since 2012.

As a high-school senior in Denver, Brandon Williams figured he would stay in state unless he got a scholarship. But when he heard about the Nebraska school’s price-match program, he jumped at the opportunity.

The 18-year-old, already familiar with the school through its basketball team, arrived earlier this month in Kearney, about 360 miles east of Denver, to start his freshman year.

“Being able to broaden my horizon without staying in-state caught my eye,” he says. “I could instantly see myself here, once I came.”

Last year, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, near St. Louis, extended in-state tuition to all domestic undergraduates. Since offering the rate to Missouri students in 2014, enrollment from that state nearly doubled, to 1,464 last fall; in the same period, enrollment by Illinois residents fell by 868.

Rather than appeal to students from far afield, Robert Morris University is offering to match average in-state tuition for two of its top competitors, the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State, through its new Public Price Match Plus guarantee. To sweeten the deal, Robert Morris is throwing in an additional \$3,000 scholarship.

The college’s program is available next year for incoming first-year Pennsylvania students who are admitted to Robert Morris and the main campus of Penn State or Pitt. Wendy Beckemeyer, vice president for enrollment management, says it is about increasing affordability and making it easier to understand how much school will actually cost.

Robert Morris’s listed \$46,772 for tuition, fees, room and board, is about \$12,000 more than at the two state schools’ main campuses. But Education Department figures show the net prices for all three were between \$23,500 and \$25,100 in the 2015-16 school year, the latest figure available.