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STATE SYSTEM PER-CREDIT EXPERIMENT UP FOR EXTENSION

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College students paying a flat tuition rate to enroll full time are known to pile on an extra course or two because they can, only to drop one or both not long into the semester.

But at **Millersville University**, the first of Pennsylvania's 14 state-owned universities to adopt per-credit pricing, that practice may be declining along with the average credit-load taken, an official said. So is the number of students wait-listed for courses, down 50 percent campus wide since the experiment began in 2014-15.

Without a price incentive to take between 12 and 18 credits each semester, some students more evenly spread their credits throughout the calendar year, giving more time for outside activities including jobs, the school has found.

But while Millersville is satisfied enough that it will seek an extension of its pilot on Thursday, a price approach criticized by some - and being watched across the State System of Higher Education - also is seeing numbers not as reassuring. For reasons not yet known, student retention rates have slipped.

"That's a concern. We're looking into it deeply," the school's vice president for finance and administration, Roger Bruszewski, said in an interview. "We need to learn why."

Still, Millersville officials say charging per-credit has generated \$5 million in additional net revenue to shore up the school's budget, while helping it move more aggressively into the

part-time and adult-student market. They say neither the four- nor the six-year graduation rates have declined, and that the share of underrepresented students has risen.

"We're changing student behaviors, how they're registering for classes," Mr. Bruszewski said. "They're becoming more deliberate."

The State System board of governors, due to vote on the experiment Thursday, has for decades set a flat tuition rate across its 14 universities. But over the past few years, with enrollment down and budgets strained, it has begun letting campuses adjust tuition and fees up or down to reflect market conditions or the cost of delivering certain programs.

Since Millersville per-credit pilot began, three other schools followed suit - Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Mansfield and Shippensburg universities.

At Millersville, undergraduates take on average about 14 credits per semester, and without any financial aid, they would pay upward of \$1,200 extra a year under the per-credit program. The system's base in-state undergraduate rate is \$7,238 a year and the per-credit rate is \$302.

But Millersville has boosted yearly financial aid for needy students by more than \$1 million and discounted the per-credit rate by 7, 4 and 1 percent the first three years.

Data supplied to the system and provided by Mr. Bruszewski said retention slipped from 80 to 78.5 percent after the freshman year; 70 to 65 percent after the sophomore year, and 70 to 62 percent after the junior year. Mr. Bruszewski said SAT scores rose and enrollment declined, but he added that officials do not believe either is the result of the experiment.

Critics including the Wolf administration and the faculty union say switching to per-credit pricing - like the price experiments in general - could make it harder for students to enroll and stay in school, especially those from poorer households.

They say the system approved dozens of price experiments without enough data on their impact.

In Harrisburg, those concerns were evident Wednesday as board members, meeting in committee, reviewed and forwarded the Millersville's per-credit program for a vote Thursday by the full board.

Wil Del Pilar, state Education Secretary Pedro Rivera's board designee, asked why more data was not available showing how students from different income brackets fared. He said students who do not attend full time are less likely to graduate.

"I don't think we should be creating policies or encouraging students to go part time," he said.

"The results of the Millersville pilot reaffirm the Governor's Office position that these pilots are really about raising revenue for schools, not improving access or affordability," J.J. Abbott, a spokesman for Gov. Tom Wolf, said after Wednesday's meeting. "In addition to a decline in retention, students experienced an increase in debt."

He added, "Any policy aimed at increasing revenue should be considered as part of the annual tuition increases, not throughout the year."

Millersville agreed that its average student loan of \$31,407 has risen, but is still at least \$6,000 less than the national average.

Kenneth Mash, president of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties, said the school's data is inadequate. He said it would be better to develop one pilot program and learn more fully about its effect before letting other schools create their own versions.

"If I had my druthers, they wouldn't have done this at all," he said. "But since they did, they should do it properly."

Millersville, though, said the average credit load taken by full-time in-state undergraduates declined from 14.5 in fall 2013 to 14.2 last year and is translating into students earning degrees more efficiently with fewer credits.