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Most College Presidents' Pay Climbing

Public-Schools Heads See 7.6% Rise; Packages at Major Private Institutions Are Flat

By ROBERT TOMSHO

The latest survey on college presidents' pay showed most of their salaries continue to climb, as families struggle to cover tuition bills and congressional leaders scrutinize higher-education finances.

Some of the largest increases lately have been at public universities, according to the annual pay survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education, a trade magazine.

For the 2007-2008 academic year, the most recent covered by the survey, median compensation for public-university presidents was \$427,400, up 7.6% from \$397,349 during the previous academic year. That was about 2.6 percentage points above the inflation rate for the period.

Fifty-nine public-university presidents were paid \$500,000 or more, up from 43 the previous academic year.

During 2006-07, the latest academic year for which private-school data were available, median compensation at liberal-arts colleges hit \$293,967, up 6.5% from the previous academic year. That exceeded the consumer-inflation rate for the period by 3.8 percentage points.

Compensation at large private research universities -- a category that includes Ivy League and other selective schools -- was flat in 2006-07 compared with the previous year at \$527,172, representing an inflation-adjusted decline. Overall, the number of private-school presidents earning \$500,000 or more rose 10% to 89.

College officials said the pay increases are necessary to attract and keep leaders capable of overseeing their complex and often large institutions.

Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education, a trade group, said the pay data included in the survey were gathered months before the current economic crisis began. He added that, given all the scrutiny the pay issue has received, if university trustees decide to increase a president's compensation, "they have probably acted in very good faith and in a way that is totally justified."

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But Patrick Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a think tank based in San Jose, Calif., said that over the longer term, college presidents have been "disproportionately rewarded" compared with faculty and other employees. "I think these people should be fairly compensated," he said, "but I think we have gone a little bit overboard."

Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, ranking Republican on the Senate Finance committee, said pay raises for college presidents, like tuition increases, regularly outpace inflation.

The Chronicle survey found that David J. Sargent, president of Suffolk University, an 8,900-student private institution in Boston, was the highest-paid president, earning \$2,800,461. In addition to a base salary of \$436,000, Mr. Sargent's compensation package included a \$1.2 million "deferred sabbatical bonus" and \$556,000 in certain deferred compensation.

Suffolk spokesman Greg Gatlin said Mr. Sargent has never taken a sabbatical in 52 years at the university, 19 as president, and that the pay package was meant to make up for "woefully inadequate" past compensation. Nicholas Macaronis, chairman of Suffolk's board of trustees, said the compensation was appropriate because Mr. Sargent's leadership is "critical" to Suffolk and its future.

Among current presidents of public universities, E. Gordon Gee of Ohio State University was the highest paid. He received \$1,346,225, which included \$775,000 in salary, \$225,000 in deferred compensation and a \$310,000 bonus.

According to a transcript, at a recent meeting of the Ohio State board of trustees where Mr. Gee's bonus was approved, Chairman Gil Gloyd told fellow trustees that Mr. Gee is the "best and most experienced university president in the nation" and that his accomplishments justified the board's faith in him.

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