



STEFAN I. MYCHAJLIW

ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER

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Contact – Office of Erie County Comptroller, 854-8400

TAXPAYERS PAY BIG BILL FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS GOING TO SCHOOL OUTSIDE ERIE COUNTY

Report: Erie County paid \$35 million over five years in chargeback fees for community college students to attend another school outside the county

(ERIE COUNTY, NY) – Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw, Jr. released a report to the Erie County Legislature on community college chargeback fees paid by Erie County taxpayers. These fees communities must pay when students in their town or city attend a community college outside of Erie County.

The County pays a “chargeback fee” to other counties for the right of an Erie County student to attend a community college in their county. The report looked back over the past five years. It found that the chargeback fees rose each year, as SUNY Erie, also known as Erie Community College or ECC, faced significant fiscal and enrollment challenges.

“In essence, taxpayers are paying twice. They’re paying taxes to fund ECC. Then they’re paying again for some of those students to attend a community college outside of Erie County. The fact that these costs keep going up should send a warning signal to the school and lawmakers,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

Chargeback fees have gone up on average 2% annually. Here is a breakdown of the chargeback fees paid by Erie County taxpayers:

- 2015: \$6,864,202.01
- 2016: \$6,928,238.39
- 2017: \$6,928,178.04
- 2018: \$7,124,894.84
- 2019: \$7,381,087.39

In total, Erie County spent \$35,226,600.67 for having its students attend 27 different community colleges other than ECC from 2015 through 2019.

The college with the most Erie County students other than ECC is Niagara County Community College. Erie County has paid NCCC \$4,606,312.26 for 28,602 course hours taken by Erie County students.

The town with the highest chargeback costs is Amherst, with \$1,216,536.86 in fees, which equates to 7,152 course hours Amherst students are taking at a community college other than ECC. The City of Buffalo is next with \$1,022,184.40 in fees, and third is Cheektowaga with \$869,872.22 in chargeback fees.

The Town of Amherst and the City of Buffalo are home to two of the three SUNY Erie Campuses. The third campus is in Orchard Park, whose students resulted in \$135,255.56 in chargeback fees.

“That’s a lot of money leaving our community for other counties. The budget burden appears to be getting bigger. ECC slashed their budget to deal with student and fiscal losses,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

With the impact of COVID-19 still very real, SUNY Erie’s Board of Trustees met on June 25th and voted to reduce the school’s budget \$22 million, from \$105.9 million to \$83.9 million. The board also included another tuition hike as a way to address anticipated losses of \$31 million in 2020-2021 due to a loss in operating revenue caused by COVID-19, as well as declining enrollment.

Chargeback fees and tuition are increasing, and the school budget is being cut, all at a time when SUNY Erie is also experiencing a large student population loss. As the Comptroller’s Office reported on June 18th of this year, the number of students attending SUNY Erie has decreased by 33.5% over the past nine years, while state funding has dropped nearly \$300,000 during that same time period, and tuition has gone up 49.5%. The Erie County Legislature has increased funding by more than \$1,000,000 during this period. SUNY Erie now has a higher tuition rate than the average community college in New York State.

“There are significant challenges facing ECC. Those challenges cost all Erie County taxpayers. Students are going elsewhere. And you, the taxpayer, pay the price. I’m confident the new leadership at ECC is working to steer the college in the right direction. I’m hopeful lawmakers work closely with them to do just that,” concluded Comptroller Mychajliw.

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