



Student Fee Autonomy

Students pay a mandatory student fee each semester. These fees called Segregated University Fees (SUF) cover various student services and activities not funded by tuition, from student unions and health centers to student organizations and student governments. Whether you are attending a cultural celebration or dance, playing intramural sports, getting a check-up at the health center, or using tutorial services, chances are you are utilizing student fee dollars.

Fees, what fees?

Students pay for both **allocable** and **non-allocable** student fees. Allocable fees mainly support student activities, such as student organizations, clubs, concerts, some athletics and recreation. Non-allocable fees support fixed obligations, such as commitments for contracts, debt retirement, and university programs requiring stable funding. Student unions, health centers, and intercollegiate athletics are funded through non-allocable fees.

Student Fees = Student Control

Wisconsin State Statute 36.09(5) guarantees UW students the unique right to student fee autonomy, the right of elected-student representatives to make collective funding decisions. Through Segregated University Fee Allocations Committees (SUFACs), commonly known as Finance Committees (SSFC, SLIC, SAB, etc.), students have the primary responsibility to budget allocable student fees. The level of student participation in this open and democratic process is determined by students. Students have an advisory role in the budgeting of nonallocable fees. Both allocable and non-allocable fees are subject to the review of campus administrators and approval by the Board of Regents. Student fee allocations are primarily regulated by the following policy papers:

Financial Policy & Procedure Paper #37 "Segregated Fee Determination & Distribution"

Financial Policy & Procedure Paper #20 "Segregated Fee Expenditures"

General Administrative Policy Paper #15 "Student Services Funding"

Board of Regent Policy 88-6 "Policy and Procedures for Segregated University Fees"

Legislative and Judicial Attacks on Student Fee Autonomy

HANDRICK AMENDMENT

In June 1995, Representative Joe Handrick introduced an amendment to the 1995-1997 Biennial Budget that would have taken away student fee autonomy and defunded several organizations, including United Council, student governments, and pre-professional organizations. United Council led a statewide coalition that fought the amendment in the State Senate, and won with bipartisan support.

BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM v. SOUTHWORTH et. al. (2000)

In April 1996, three UW-Madison Law students filed a suit claiming that the existing student fee system violated their first amendment rights by forcing them to support “political and ideological” student organizations which they objected to. In the spring of 2000, the United States Supreme Court in a unanimous, landmark decision ruled that Wisconsin’s mandatory student fee system is constitutional as long as fees are allocated in viewpoint-neutral manner.

Viewpoint Neutrality

Viewpoint neutrality means that funding decisions cannot be based upon an organization’s political or ideological stance. Decisions must be based on criteria, including educational value, existence of similar programming, availability of other funding sources, populations served, et cetera. Every organization across the ideological spectrum must have equal opportunity to receive funding.

However, organizations themselves do not have to be viewpoint neutral-- in fact, the Court encourages the funding of diverse political and ideological groups. Groups with opposing viewpoints do not have to receive equal funding; equal funding would only be required if the groups were the same based on all the funding criteria. Viewpoint neutrality pertains to the process by which funds are distributed, not the outcome or makeup of the allocation bodies such as student fee committees.

How do student fees enhance your education?

Student fees fund a variety of viewpoints on UW campuses. A broad spectrum of organizations and ideologies enhance the education of students by creating an open forum for the expression of diverse viewpoints. In this “marketplace of ideas,” controversial ideas are encouraged to be debated.

Nearly all non-instructional student activities are funded with student fees. Student organizations provide opportunities for students to develop valuable leadership skills for a robust out-of-the-classroom learning experience.