For Colleges, Small Cuts Add Up to Big Savings

By TAMAR LEWIN

College life may look different in the not-so-distant future: Students squinting out dirtier windows, faculty offices with full wastebaskets and no phones, sporting events in which opponents never meet, and paper course catalogs existing only as artifacts of the wasteful old days.

While colleges and universities slashed their spending this year with wrenching layoffs, hiring freezes and halts in construction projects, they whittled away at costs with smaller, quirkier economies, too:

¶ At the University of Washington, the communications department faculty did away with their landlines. ("Phones were our biggest line item," said David Domke, the department chairman. "We've still got landlines in common areas and for staff, but we're saving about $1,100 a month by getting rid of faculty phones.")

¶ At Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., the women's swim team held a "virtual swim meet" with Bryn Mawr College, in Pennsylvania, about 122 miles away. Each team swam in its home pool, then compared times to determine the winners. ("We probably saved $900 on bus travel," said William G. Durden, Dickinson's president.)

¶ At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the traditional bus tour of the state for new faculty members was suspended this year. ("In a recession, people don't want to see 100 faculty members traveling around and staying in hotels," said Holden Thorp, the chancellor.)

Across the country, colleges have come up with a host of ideas that, taken together, stand as higher education's household hints for living on a budget.

Campus life is getting a bit dirtier as housekeeping standards are relaxed. Oberlin College in Ohio saved $22,300 by scaling back on window washing, and Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., is power washing its sidewalks and windows once a year instead of twice. Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., is having office trash picked up weekly instead of daily, a change that eliminated three custodian jobs.

And in a move that directly involves academics, Carleton, which recently eased teachers' course loads to five per teacher from six, now plans to return to six courses to save money.

After years of boom times that led to competition among colleges to provide more luxurious dorm rooms and student centers, some perks of campus life have gone by the wayside. Dickinson, for example, is saving $150,000 by cutting back on free laundry service for students and an additional $75,000 by eliminating free ESPN and HBO in student rooms.

Whittier College in California cut one day of its new-student orientation, saving $50,000. Whitman College
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in Walla Walla, Wash., put a cap on students’ free printing in libraries and labs, limiting them to $60 worth of free printing per semester. Next year, students will be limited to $50 per semester.

Most widespread, most proudly announced — and, it seems, most likely to have nicknames — are cost-cutting programs that help sustainability. Hundreds of colleges and universities are turning down their thermostats to save on heating, in programs like “Chill-Out” at Davidson College in North Carolina.

Cafeterias, too, are saving money, cutting food waste and reducing hot-water and detergent costs by eliminating trays. When Whittier began “Trayless Tuesdays” last fall, lunchtime food waste dropped to 4.6 ounces per student from 7.4 ounces — and the college saved almost $30,000 a semester after going fully trayless in the spring.

Many colleges are reducing their use of paper by putting admissions brochures, course catalogs and phone directories online instead of on paper.

Colleges are also installing low-flow shower heads and energy-saving light bulbs and holding contests to see which dorm can most reduce its electricity costs.

At Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pa., the contest resulted in almost $3,000 saved as students competed in turning off lights and unplugging chargers and printers. Students in participating dorms got 25 percent of the savings, $730, for pizza parties and other programs.

Davidson saved more than $10,000 by switching from bottled water to tap at most college events.

Many colleges are rebuilding computers instead of buying new ones, limiting the purchase and use of campus vehicles and scheduling more videoconferences and less travel.

Room phones and voicemail systems are fading away now that the vast majority of students depend on their cellphones. Cornell College, in Mount Vernon, Iowa, estimates that it saved $40,000 by not replacing old voicemail equipment.

Rhodes College in Memphis economizes — and gives students work experience — by hiring students in 25 professional staff positions, saving $725,000 a year. And the College of Wooster in Ohio is trying to hold on to financially struggling students, and their tuition dollars, by offering minimum-wage summer jobs in its “WooCorps,” which has almost 200 students painting rooms, landscaping and growing vegetables this summer. WooCorps students will get an extra $1,000 in their financial aid packages — and help the college complete more maintenance projects than usual.

Many colleges are cutting food-service options, too. Wooster shuttered one of its two dining halls, and Oberlin reduced the operating hours at its cafe.

Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pa., is no longer serving breakfast at trustees’ meetings; instead, it will give trustees passes to the cafeteria. Faculty members there will now have planning sessions over brown-bag lunches instead of dinner at the president’s house.

To some, little cuts are more energizing than irritating.
"We found a way of saving money that doesn’t hurt the student experience, and I think everybody’s happy," said Mr. Domke of the University of Washington. "With cellphones and e-mail, everyone can get hold of us. People think it’s funny that we’re the communications department and we cut phones. But it’s just a symbol, an old technology."

He paused before continuing, "I’ve suggested to geography that they may want to get rid of their globes."