

Matching mission at the heart of Loyola's tuition costs

People might look at the Loyola Blakefield's stately Towson campus and think the students who attend there can easily afford the \$16,845 tuition, which includes fees.

Father Thomas A. Pesci, the Jesuit priest who serves as president of the school, knows differently.

"I think they would die if they knew we accepted a boy who is currently homeless," Father Pesci said. "I think our boards have been pretty adamant that it is our mission to retain affordability to a broad spectrum of people."

Loyola Blakefield, Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson and Maryvale Preparatory School in Brooklandville are the three most expensive secondary institutions in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

"The perception is that the clientele of these schools is largely very well-heeled and therefore we're charging exorbitant amounts of money and there are no issues," he said. "I think each of the schools tries real hard to be faithful to a much more diverse mission and it in fact extraordinarily challenging to make financial ends meet."

Father Pesci added that tuition at a mission-driven school is achieved, through, "a lot of sweat and blood."

"I think we sort of back into it by looking at what do we think of what the market can bear in terms of an increase,"

Father Pesci said. Loyola Blakefield tuition costs \$800 more than last year.

"I know tuition is roughly 72 or 73 percent of actual cost," Father Pesci said. "That's not good simply from a fiduciary standpoint. If you look at the National Association for Independent Schools markers for success for school, they highly recommend that marker be at 93 percent."

Loyola Blakefield's fundraising is impacted dramatically, particularly when the

market is depressed. In order to offset those numbers, the school has sought to increase annual giving and making a school auction an annual event. The March event has gone from a \$75,000 event to a \$350,000 one. The school also sought to work with classes celebrating their graduation anniversaries to build endowments, which could be beneficial when the markets improve.

“We’re kind of setting the setting the stage for the long run and in the short run,” Father Pesci said.

The school’s Greater Glory Scholarship also helps students who might not have money to attend the school. Loyola Blakefield has a strong tie to the Boys Hope program, an organization Father Pesci has been supportive of throughout his career. Three or four Boys Hope residents will attend Loyola Blakefield this fall.

Days before their graduation, Father Pesci asked members of the 2011 class to make a five-year pledge and to try and make the first payment as soon as possible. One particular student was marked for support.

“By the day we graduated, we had \$23,000 in pledges,” Father Pesci said, adding that the number is now at \$25,000 with more potentially coming from families. “It kind of shows when you’re doing the right thing, it tugs at the right part of people’s heart strings.”

Father Pesci said there is pressure on the school to increase enrollment. Even when that happens, Father Pesci said, the amount of financial need rises.

“On the balance, you’re going to make a little bit more than you’re losing,” he said “It actually helps us to diversify our student body by trying to increase the enrollment, surprisingly, because we’re not taking all full pay customers. We’re going through the broad spectrum.”

Father Pesci said the school had “very major cost cutting.” The administration also measures an appropriate student-teacher ratio, has renegotiated contracts for copy machines and paper and managed energy usage.

Father Pesci said the school can’t lose sight of its origins.

"I think what we don't do is change in a negative way," Father Pesci said. "We don't want to have full-paying customers because that's not our mission. The question becomes, 'Can we push the price point up a little bit while still maintaining the diversity and the all the other things we want to do programmatically?' You've got a lot of things working in tandem to make sure we're using every dollar that comes in the door as effectively as we can possibly can."

Father Pesci said he is also "pretty aggressive in trying to fundraise to some of my parents who can easily afford tuition." He hopes they will give to the Greater Glory Scholarship funds. He often seeks past and current families to sponsor a student for half or all of the tuition cost.

The school is trying, through a capital campaign, to provide competitive facilities for students of all religions. The priest said he and Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien have a similar philosophy. They want to raise the sights of Catholics to expect first class.

"As we do brick and mortar, we're trying to pay off existing debt and trying to build an endowment for the future," Father Pesci said. "People might say, 'Oh there's a building going up, they must have a lot of money. The fact of the matter is, we're borrowing it and we're fundraising for that and fundraising beyond what's in front of you for 20 and 30 years down the pike. It can't just be about school's survival today. We've lived hand to mouth, from cup of soup to the next, for too long. We have to do something a little more substantial."