

Friday, January 9, 2009

A better education?

Or will tuition increase just replace cuts

State universities are quite the bargain in Florida — indeed, the 11 institutions of higher learning charge the lowest tuition and fees in the country.

Strangely enough, a growing number of Floridians — 48 percent — think tuition is too high, according to the recently released Sunshine State Survey.

That's a serious disconnect.

Here's another: While most survey respondents rated a state education favorably, those public institutions have the lowest faculty-student ratio in the nation. That raises questions about the quality of the education.

Both issues are coming to a head.

Bearing that worst-in-the-nation ratio in mind, in November Gov. Charlie Crist proposed letting universities raise tuition by as much as 15 percent a year.

Crist's plan, supported by such powerful business leadership organizations as the Council of 100, the Florida Chamber Foundation and the Associated Industries of Florida, is expected to raise \$72 million in the first year and \$1.5 billion over the next seven years, with the money earmarked for new faculty hires — and thus a better education and stronger future employees.

When unveiling this alongside beaming university presidents, Crist stated: "You produce good jobs by having great education."

No argument there. We agree.

And no argument that the 11 state schools are strapped for cash. With far fewer dollars coming from the Legislature, those universities and colleges have chopped academic programs, cut enrollment and laid off faculty.

In the past year alone, the University of Florida slashed more than \$50 million while the University of South Florida got hammered with a \$35.6 million cut.

The condition of our higher education system should be of grave concern. In a September editorial, we urged Crist, the Legislature and the business and education communities to put more stock into higher education.

In a December op-ed that appeared in The Miami Herald, St. Petersburg Times and other newspapers, University of Florida president Bernie Machen wrote this in defense of Crist's tuition increase proposal:

"It's reasonable to ask, what's so bad about being cheap?"

"No doubt, Florida's low tuition makes UF and other state universities a terrific bargain. . . . But here's the problem: The longer we charge bargain-basement tuition, the closer we get to handing out worthless diplomas."

No argument there, either.

But . . .

With the state's economy in the tank, the Legislature continues to slash spending right and left. Higher education is in the crosshairs for another \$100 million or so budget cut during the current special session — even though Crist's chief of staff reported back in November that Republican legislative leaders promised to shield higher education funding.

Crist, the university presidents and the business community fully support a stronger system for a more prosperous future, as we do.

The Legislature apparently does not. Lawmakers might talk the talk, but they're not walking the walk.

Under the political cover of budget reductions and ignoring all calls for revenue enhancements, the Republican-dominated Legislature appears content to continue its finely tuned practice of shifting funding responsibilities to county governments, local school boards and everyone else with a wallet.

Why should Floridians support a tuition increase under these circumstances? Why should parents and students assume greater responsibility while the Legislature abdicates its?

This looks more like what former Gov. Bob Graham, well known as an education advocate, feared from the moment Crist announced the tuition-increase plan — another cost-shifting opportunity for the Legislature.

If lawmakers approve another budget reduction for state universities and colleges over the next week, they destroy the argument that a tuition increase will boost the quality of education. The money will merely replace a portion of their cuts.

We'll remind lawmakers of this when the tuition proposal lands on their desks, likely when the regular session opens in March. That's when we expect legislators to perform a song and dance about improving education.