

COMMENT

Better education means a better Michigan

According to a recent *Detroit News* CyberSurvey, nearly 49 percent of student respondents say they will drop out of college, at least temporarily, if tuition is raised 10 percent or more this fall at our state universities. That compares to only 14 percent who say, luckily, they or their parents can afford the increase. Does this give you pause?

The sad truth is that, as of late July, 11 of the state's 15 public universities have had to raise tuition anywhere from 6.4 to 21 percent for the 2007-2008 academic year. Grand Valley State University announced a 9.9 percent increase in July.

The hikes come on the heels of tens of millions in state budget cuts and deferred payments to our institutions of higher education.

For years our public universities have felt the blow of Michigan's shrinking. Having cut allocations by 20 percent from 2002 to 2007, Michigan ranks lowest among the 50 states in higher-education investments over the past five years.

This comes after decades of eroding state support. For example, in 1960, state funds made up nearly 80 percent of the University of Michigan's budget.



Birgit Klohs

THE RIGHT CHOICE

That number has shrunk to 24 percent today.

According to the *Detroit News*, state funding of the cost of sending a student through college has dropped from about 75 percent in the 1960s to less than 35 percent today. Universities that were once publicly funded are now barely supported by the state. Can we really say these are still public institutions?

According to the state auditor general, Michigan's 15 public universities have collectively raised tuition 37 percent in the past four years, making Michigan the nation's fifth-most-costly state in which to get a public college education.

Brandon White, Michigan field organizer for the U.S. Student Association, contends that col-

lege is no longer an option for many Michigan students because they simply cannot afford it.

Carolyn Kelly accurately points out in a recent Michigan Land Use Institute bulletin article, "Lawmakers are cutting budgets for institutions that are essential for ensuring Michigan's competitiveness Tuition hikes largely (make) up the shortfall, according to university budget officers, making it more difficult for students to earn a college degree."

Is this the direction Michigan should be heading? Everywhere we turn we hear that to remain globally competitive, Michigan must transform to a knowledge economy.

And what is the number-one ingredient necessary to build and sustain a strong knowledge economy? Talent. Knowledge workers. Well-educated, highly skilled people who can help establish, sustain and grow the high-tech, sophisticated industries that Michigan, particularly western Michigan, is working to attract.

Our state budget crisis demands that Michigan's leaders make tough decisions. But I do not understand why those decisions must include limiting our students' access to a college education.

I am even more perplexed when I compare our decreasing state expenditures on higher education to our ever-increasing expenditures on Michigan's prisons. Here we have the dubious honor of claiming the highest incarceration rate in the Great Lakes area — more than 40 percent higher than the average of our seven Great Lakes neighbors, according to the Citizens Research Council of Michigan.

And, defying all logic, our exploding prison population is not the result of rising crime rates. In fact while our crime rate has declined since 1981, our prison population has climbed, resulting in one of the highest prisoner-to-resident ratios in the country. Concurrent with a rise in the prison population has been an increase in the cost of caring for those in the system — currently about \$31,000 per prisoner each year.

Something is definitely wrong with this picture.

As a new University of Michigan Center for Local, State and Urban Policy report so aptly illustrates, rather than a state in economic devastation, we must view Michigan as being in transition toward a knowledge economy. This is the picture all of us — particularly those in Lansing — must keep in mind when making decisions about what to cut, what

to fix and what to invest in for our future.

If we are serious about making this transition, then we need to be serious about funding our public universities. Some of nation's fastest growing states are also those who are investing the most in higher education. There should be no debate.

Michigan Future Inc.'s report, "A New Agenda for a New Michigan," underscores this point when it states that locations "without concentrations of talent will have great difficulty retaining or attracting knowledge-based enterprises, nor are they likely to be the place where new knowledge-based enterprises are created."

When it comes time for the next round of state budget discussions, please add my name to the list of Michigan citizens who implore our elected officials to get serious about structural budget reform. We cannot continually erode our investments in education and expect a better Michigan.

Birgit Klohs is president of the Right Place Inc. "The Right Choice" alternates with columns by Southwest Michigan First's Ron Kitchens, Lakeshore Advantage's Randy Thelen and Battle Creek Unlimited's James Hettinger.

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