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Michigan must revamp higher education policy

Michigan's latest round of outrageous college tuition hikes has made the challenge of paying for college even more worrisome for students and their families.

But the state's political leaders don't seem nearly as concerned. The double-digit tuition increases at several state universities have been met with near silence by the people voters elected to represent their interests. The hikes should at least generate a serious discussion in Lansing about higher education policy.

Like Michigan's old business tax, higher education policy is still largely a reflection of the state's industrial era. And like the business tax, the state's overall approach to higher education needs to be revamped.

The Big Three university leaders have at least started a dialogue by calling for a separate state appropriations bill for their colleges, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University.

Naturally, these institutions are looking out for their best interests and for good reason. But they make an excellent point that top-rank research schools can be economic drivers.

The state's other 12 public universities are fighting the proposal, as should be expected. But it could form the foundation for a new way of looking at the public investment in higher education.

We support the Big Three's proposal. But we also would like the conversation about their request to be two-sided. If Michigan gives more to the Big Three universities, it should get more in return.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm and state leaders should look at the funding request as an opportunity to better connect the state's economic agenda to its premier universities. A key question is how can universities be reorganized to accommodate existing workers' needs and be aligned with the state's longer-term economic development strategy?

Among the issues that state leaders should consider:

In return for a separate appropriations bill, U-M and Michigan State especially should be held accountable for increasing their percentage of in-state students. U-M's fall 2006 undergraduate class, for example, was made up of 63 percent of Michigan students. That number should be higher.

The universities should be working more closely with Michigan schools struggling with high school dropout rates, such as Flint, Detroit and Pontiac. The colleges can lend training and leverage grants for programs to get more urban students ready for college.

The schools should commit to strong retention programs to improve their graduation rates. Wayne State in particular should focus on making sure more of its students complete four-year degrees. The state is wasting too much money on freshmen and sophomores who never become graduates.

The state could also hold the Big Three responsible for specific economic development targets, including the transfer of technology to the marketplace, suggests Richard Novak, vice president for public programs at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

The Big Three universities are developing a research corridor, inspired by the Research Triangle in the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina. Currently, the corridor is just a Web site. If the universities are serious about helping stimulate Michigan's economic recovery, they need a more tangible presence.

Michigan needs the Big Three schools to thrive -- and vice versa. Developing a stronger Michigan-Big Three partnership to boost college access and economic development should be a key part of the needed overhaul of the state's higher education policy.

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