

# Keep higher education affordable

The National Center of Public Policy and Higher Education tells us there are five major trends in higher education in the United States today:

1. Increases in tuition have made higher education less affordable for most American families.
2. Federal and state financial aid to students has not kept pace with increases in tuition.
3. More students and families at all income levels are borrowing more than ever before to pay for college.
4. The steepest increases in public college tuition have been imposed during time of greatest economic hardship.
5. State financial support of public higher education has increased, but tuition has increased more.

Unfortunately, it probably comes as no surprise that Montana is not only part of this dismal 10-year trend, we are among the worst.

When it comes to participation and affordability for higher education, the National Center gives Montana a D for participation and an F for affordability. Montana receives a D in participation in spite of the fact that Montana's high school students are well prepared for college. The National Center gives Montana an A in preparation. However, only 36 percent of Montana's high school graduates enroll in college within four years, while the average among top states is 54 percent.

## Shifting the burden to students

From 1992 to 2002, tuition and fees at the University of Montana increased 303 percent. During this same period of time, funding for the University System increased by less than one percent each year, and per student funding fell from \$5,348 to \$4,184, a drop of 22 percent.

These figures make it clear that the Montana Legislature is shifting the cost of higher education from the state to the student, a process usually referred to as privatization of our public universities.

Let's look at the University of Montana as an example: In 1992, 73 percent of funding for educational programs came from the state, while 27 percent came from tuition and fees. By 2002, only

42 percent of funding came from the state, while 58 percent came from tuition and fees.

In 2003, it was estimated that low income families would need to devote 59 percent of their income to maintain one student in the Montana University System. The median income group would need to devote 22 percent of their income. These figures are calculated using expenses minus financial aid. No wonder our participation rates merited a D!

## What do legislators want?

Given the legislative majority's apparent reluctance to fund the University System to make it accessible for our children, we may ask what the legislature feels the state needs from the University System. The National Education Association, in its Higher Education Issues Survey of State Legislative Views, found state legislators want the following almost without exception:

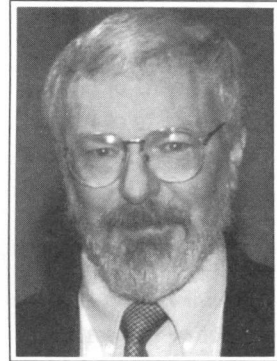
1. Strengthen and diversify the economy.
2. Prepare and train a high-skill, high-wage workforce.
3. Raise the level of educational attainment of the state's citizens.

One need only read Montana newspapers and listen to statements of our legislators to realize these are, without a doubt, the most often highlighted roles of higher education.

This leads to a bit of confusion. How can the University System prepare and train a high-skill, high-wage workforce and raise the level of Montanans' education if the system is not accessible?

The goal is to strengthen and diversify the economy (economic development). There is no chicken and the egg problem here. We can't strengthen and diversify the economy and *then* fund a strong university. Montana must build a strong university system that will play a critical role in state economic development efforts.

The MEA-MFT identifies legislative candidates who support the total education package: elementary, secondary, and higher education. And these candidates are willing to fund education. Your support of these candidates is urged. A strong University System is good for our state and good for our children. ■



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