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2012-12-21 / Opinion/Crime

S.C. colleges should consider affordability

By Richard Eckstrom

College campuses across South Carolina are quiet at this season of the year as students and faculty enjoy the break between semesters.

As they do, this special season gives us a chance to think about what would make a truly wonderful Christmas present, not only for our young people aspiring to attend college but also for the families of our state – making college more affordable.

It's no secret that higher education costs have been skyrocketing for over a decade, skyrocketing even at the two-year level.

Data from the S.C. Commission on Higher Education shows that, pretty much across the board, tuition rates for in-state students attending our state-supported colleges and universities have more than doubled this past decade.

In many cases, a college degree is now out of reach for many families in S.C. because they can no longer afford the tremendous cost.

Or folks go deeply into debt to try to cover the cost—heavy debt that will seriously weigh on students and families for decades to come.

It doesn't have to be this way in South Carolina.

State government's funding for higher education has declined in recent years, especially once the state began "helping" students by awarding them generous scholarships funded by ticket sales from the state lottery. Yet, as scholarships increased, so did tuition costs.

But there's another major reason for runaway tuition costs—the misplaced spending priorities of many of our colleges and universities.

Too many of our schools seem to focus on the wrong things first—like enhancing their national prestige or expanding their campuses in what many of us consider unnecessary, costly spending and building— instead of concentrating first and foremost on providing a solid, affordable college education to South Carolina students.

That's why, at so many meetings of the S.C. Budget and Control Board, I urge the other board members to be more watchful in approving these campus building projects. In fact, at our latest meeting the other members joined with me in withholding approval for about half the requests we received and that normally were likely to have been approved. I appreciate their votes.

Individually, all projects can be made to sound indispensable. But taken together, they burden the schools with more IOUs that add to a growing mountain of public debt that taxpayers ultimately may have to repay while at the same time many of them will be struggling to pay off student loans.

No matter the frequent denials, there's a direct connection between college tuition levels and campus construction projects.

In fact, state law caps the total amount of debt that a school can incur, and a school can increase its cap only by increasing its tuition levels. That's a strong temptation.

Returning to the issue of misplaced priorities, I read an article not too long ago about how some academic departments at one of our major state-funded colleges had disconnected faculty phone lines because of budget problems.

Yet, that same school is busily expanding its campus, building new projects as if those new projects aren't adding to its high costs that already are creating budget problems.

I should also mention lobbying. Many of our colleges and universities continue to spend tens of thousands of dollars every year trying to influence decisions by the S.C. General Assembly. They're actually spending your money trying to get more of your money.

These examples really call into question where some of our colleges and universities are devoting their energies.

Many of them are doing great work. But that work doesn't mean nearly as much when so many of our young people can't afford to participate in it.

One solution that's been discussed, and even proposed through bills that die in the Legislature, is establishing a board of regents to oversee our entire public system of higher education, versus continuing our current arrangement where each school operates totally independent of one another with separate boards of trustees.

Other states, including North Carolina and Georgia, have a board of regents system that seems to work well for them. Yet our public colleges oppose and lobby against a board of regents system.

Maybe we should consider trying it. Families who work hard to get ahead and look out for each other—folks like you and other Columbia Star readers—are the ones our colleges should be thinking about, not their school's ranking in some national journal.

-Richard Eckstrom is the comptroller general of South Carolina and commander of the S. C. State Guard.

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