

Private colleges, universities offer state higher ed options

It is an unfortunate reality of our time that higher education budgets have to be cut. The economic slowdown has led to a dramatic shortfall in tax revenue. This comes at precisely the same time higher education finds itself in competition for public funds with other equally critical social needs. The growth of both the school-age and aging populations, an increasing number of low-income families requiring assistance, and the unexpected costs of providing for homeland security - these and other factors presage difficult decisions for those making the cuts and those facing the cuts.



Ted Blaschak

It is small consolation that Michigan isn't alone in the current budget crisis. Most other states face identical challenges. Our elected leaders have the unenviable task of evaluating the budget as a whole and making the best of a tragic situation. As budget deadlines draw nearer, it seems ever more likely that higher education will be called on to assume what seems like a disproportionate share of the cuts. A few current statistics will help to bring the picture into sharper focus: The nation's colleges and universities are bracing for a wave of students to hit campuses over the next decade. The surge, propelled by an upturn in births throughout the 1990s, will produce the largest high school and college enrollments in U.S. history. Eighty-three percent of students in Michigan are enrolled in public institutions for postsecondary education. Public colleges continue to become less affordable for students and families. At public four-year colleges and universities, 16 states have increased tuition and fees by more than 10 percent, while Michigan raised tuition by 9 percent.

In Michigan, Gov. Jennifer Granholm won almost instant legislative approval of most of her \$158 million budget-balancing plan for the current year, including \$30 million cut from colleges. Of course, this couldn't come at a worse time. As new technologies continue to change the way we live and work, businesses will continue to need workers with a higher level of knowledge and skills. Further, the recent economic downturn led major sectors of the economy to restructure.

Although an economic recovery appears to be under way, many thousands of workers have been displaced and are in need of retraining. Those who kept their jobs will have to gain new knowledge and skills just to help their companies - and themselves - survive. As obvious as is the need to cut education budgets, it is equally obvious that education is the only way for us to retrain and reposition our workforce.

Michigan, along with many other states, finds itself in a classic Catch-22. We have to cut budgets at precisely the time we can't afford to cut them. Solving this dilemma will not be easy or

pointless. In the face of this seemingly intractable dilemma, this state and many others will need to utilize all the educational resources available to steer through these rapids and toward long-term, stable prosperity. The question, of course, is just how to accomplish this.

The answer must be a focused and strategic approach that recognizes that educational resources at our disposal and positions them to serve the populations they are most capable of serving. As public institutions struggle to deal with the influx of new high school graduates and maintain service levels on decreased budgets, private institutions must rise to the occasion and assist in meeting the state's needs. These institutions fall into many different categories, so a focused approach will be key to ensuring that all needs are met.

Traditional private institutions have long provided higher education opportunities for the state's high school graduates. Their continued role in this function is crucial, not only in serving society but also in helping to ease the financial burden on public institutions. These schools will also ultimately be confined in their ability to grow because of their own internal budget constraints, and so this too must be recognized as a finite resource.

Over the years, the nation has seen a rise in the number of for-profit institutions of postsecondary education. For example, one of the nation's first and leading education providers in this category is DeVry, located in Illinois. DeVry has not only demonstrated success in this area, but their Keller School of Management is consistently referenced among the nation's leading business schools. Founded in 1931, DeVry has been a respected member of the Illinois higher education community for years. The University of Phoenix, the nation's largest private higher education institution, has Detroit-area learning centers in Livonia, Southfield and Troy, and has a West-Michigan Campus with locations in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. University of Phoenix is also in the process of opening additional campus locations in Ann Arbor and Lansing. The University of Phoenix has been recognized for its rigorous academic programs and unique working adult student learning model.

These institutions are symbolic of a sector that provides much-needed opportunities for the state's adult students to pursue postsecondary education. This, in turn, will allow state institutions to focus more directly on meeting the needs of the growing population of younger students. Further, these institutions don't deplete scarce state funds; quite the reverse, in fact. Instead, they contribute back to the tax base of the state.

While it is unfortunate that just when the need for higher education is so critical the exigencies of our current economy require that budgets be cut, the good news is that creative options can help.

Ted Blaschak is the vice president and campus director for the University of Phoenix-Metro-Detroit Campus, with learning centers in Livonia, Southfield and Troy.

Disparate local events drawn together by common theme

Every now and again, a week goes by during which a great many oddly connected things cross my desk.

This past week, for instance, we received notices of two "Support the Troops" rallies, one at Seven Mile and Farmington roads and another in downtown Farmington. Both will be held on Saturday, complete with signs, flag-waving and plenty of patriotic songs.

You wouldn't know it to watch the evening news, but it appears most of the country supports President Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the war in Iraq. In fact, the administrator's poll numbers have been climbing steadily since the war started.

More than 70 percent of Americans approve of the job George W. Bush is doing, about the same number back his plan to oust Saddam Hussein.

On Saturday, some of those folks - and maybe even some who don't support the war - will be out in force to show their men and women whose lives are on the line that politics don't really matter when blood hits the sand.

Another unique show of support for U.S. troops will happen at Central Michigan University the same day. Farmington Schools students attending the Destination Imagination State Tournament have been invited to take part in an effort to break the world record for the largest hug.

Just in case you were wondering, the record is currently 2,865 people. It was set at a school district in Montana.

That may be Big Sky country, but Michigan is Big Heart country, so I'm predicting the old record will fall. If you've got a free evening and don't mind the drive to Mount Pleasant, the hug will begin at 6 p.m., around Rose Arena.

On Tuesday, the American Family Association of Michigan let us know about a different kind of demonstration. The AFA claimed some students at Farmington and North Farmington High School - and perhaps even some teachers - planned to disrupt classes Wednesday by conducting a "Day of Silence" protest.

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network promotes this event, which began at an East Coast university in 1996, promoting the basic idea that education and awareness are the best ways to combat discrimination and harassment. Nowhere more than in our schools do the concepts of respect and an appreciation for diversity need to be taught.

At this year's student diversity day, held at the Farmington Training Center in February, student organizers saw the need to address sexual orientation with a dedicated seminar.

In other words, kids see problems with harassment and disrespect in their own schools.

Sexual orientation has been included in discussions of the Farmington/Farmington Hills Multicultural/Multiracial Community Council, but not directly addressed. The council has plenty of work dealing with racial, cultural and religious diversity in our communities. School officials tell us more than 80 different languages are spoken in homes throughout the district.

But gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender discrimination also raises difficult questions that divide even the most tolerant among us. Is sexual orientation coded genetically or is it a chosen behavior? Does God condemn homosexuals to eternal damnation or is this small percentage of our population integral to the whole of His creation?

Someone very near and dear to me is gay, and I come from a very conservative Christian family. Some of us believe homosexuality is a sin; others believe it's inherent, a trait like eye color or being left-handed.

The balance we've struck is simply this: unconditional love, mutual respect and acceptance, without approval.

We agree to disagree. We pray for one another and share our beliefs without making anyone else feel judged or ashamed.

In matters of the heart, there is always a bottom line. Why can't it be so in our daily lives?

The AFA's press release demonstrates the same kind of political bias they accuse gay activists of promoting in schools. They call on school officials to deliver the message that being gay shortens your life, puts you at more risk of drug abuse, mental illness, domestic abuse and life-threatening illness.

Which all seems like a natural consequence in a society where people who aren't heterosexual are routinely harassed and judged as less than Christian, less than "normal."

If the so-called "homosexual agenda" is inherent in the "Day of Silence," it is an agenda worthy of support. Every child, regardless of race, culture, religion or sexual orientation, deserves to learn in a safe, caring atmosphere of mutual respect, free from harassment.

All three of these events provide local residents with the opportunity to speak freely about issues important to them. All three require citizens to step forward, make an effort and stand behind their beliefs.

Over the years, thousands of men and women have given their lives so we have the right to speak our minds. What better way to show appreciation for their sacrifice than by doing just that?

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments in person or by mail at 23411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335; by phone, (248) 477-5450; by fax, (248) 477-9122; or via e-mail, jhubred@oe.homecom.net.



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