

Criser: Raise state-university tuition Miami Herald, 3/18/2009

Florida has an important decision to make. Do we want our state universities to be known for a high-quality education or bargain-basement degrees?

Florida ranks at the bottom of national rankings when it comes to tuition, charging \$3,800 annually versus the national average of \$6,600. This means larger classes, fewer professors, fewer course offerings and reduced value of Florida degrees in the eyes of employers and graduate schools. Our 11 public universities are struggling with these challenges, including Florida International University.

It's time for Florida's leaders to balance the scale and invest in higher education. This means, as a first step, supporting Sen. Ken Pruitt's bill (SB 762) and its House companion, sponsored by Rep. Will Weatherford (HB 403). The legislation would allow the gradual increase in tuition funding by up to 15 percent annually until it reaches the national average. Most important, 70 percent of the new revenue would be used to enhance undergraduate programs while 30 percent would be targeted for need-based financial aid.

Why is this so critical? Simply put, a quality higher-education system means prosperity and jobs, especially as we pull out of this economic recession and transition to our future economy. Only a fully supported university system can develop the skilled workforce needed to retain and attract innovative employers that will create high-paying jobs.

We know that employers go where the talent is, and the most innovative employers go to where the most highly skilled workforce exists. This is why Florida's leading business groups, including the Florida Chamber of Commerce and The Florida Council of 100, have made education and this specific legislation their top priority this year.

Tuition currently pays about a quarter of what it costs to run state universities, while taxpayers foot the bill for the remainder. With the severe strain currently placed on the Legislature and every taxpayer, we cannot afford this imbalance any longer.

To pull out of this recession and claim a position as a leading global competitor, Florida must fully support quality higher education. Our work begins with this vital legislation. Urge your lawmakers to support these bills at www.leg.state.fl.us.

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