

## **Back to Basics: Reexamining the Mission of Florida's Higher Education System**

*By: Stanley G. Tate, chairman, Florida Prepaid College Board*

This Fall, students in Florida's community colleges and universities will pay more than ever before for their tuition, but with no assurance that the quality of education they will be receiving has or will improve. This year, the Florida Legislature increased tuition by 15%. This increase was on top of the 15% and 10% increases in 1992 and 1991, respectively. In three years, the cost of higher education at Florida's universities has increased over 45% -- a startling statistic.

When examined in light of state funding for universities, this 45% increase becomes even more outrageous. The Florida Legislature has reduced per student funding from \$7,200, in 1989/90, to \$5,300 this year. More and more of the per student funding category comes from the student and their families! For example, of the \$55 million in supplemental funding appropriated by the 1992 Legislature, \$40 million was raised through the tuition increase. Because the Legislature has ignored the critical needs of higher education for so long, it will now take approximately \$300 million in new revenues just to restore the universities to the 1989/1990 levels. In these economic times of heightened uncertainties, it is extremely doubtful that this amount will be authorized.

So the Legislature will continue with its policy of "pay me now or pay me later," while Legislators continue to assert that "later" is not "now" but years in the future. Our present legislators, fearing that development of an adequate tax base will result in their defeat at the polls, continue with this policy. Once again the hopes and aspirations of the low and middle class, for a better life for their children through education, are lost due to our current legislators' concerns with their immediate election prospects rather than the future of this state.

Unfortunately, we may not have the opportunity to pay later at this rate. The price tag may be out of reach for the state as well as the vast majority of Floridians, and something must be done now to stem this tide. I believe this "something" is a re-examination of the basic fundamental mission of the state in their support of higher education and indeed the very purpose of our public universities.

Since enacting the 1885 Constitution, Florida has recognized its obligation to fund primary education (grades kindergarten through twelfth); support for higher education should be no different. In 1885 a high school education was quite an accomplishment. Certainly a secondary school education was all that was needed at that time to be competitive in the job market. In fact, a high school diploma assured most workers of a secure lifetime of earnings. NO MORE! Without a college degree, workers simply are not equipped to cope with the technological demands of today's and tomorrow's competitive environment.

Florida has recognized the value of education by requiring all its citizens to support the K-12 education system via taxes. Unless the state views higher education in the same light, Florida will be known for producing fast food and other low income workers--not high magnetic lab scientists and other professionals. The responsibility for a higher education should be a state obligation, and, in my opinion, is no different than the responsibility of a state to provide a kindergarten through twelfth grade education, perhaps even more so in today's environment.

The expressed view that low tuition is merely an "inequitable and unneeded subsidy for higher-income families, from which a large portion of public-college students come," as stated by President Thomas P. Wallace of Illinois State University in the April 1, 1992 edition of The Chronicles of Higher Education, must be examined. This concept, quite prevalent in the academic community, proposes to charge the maximum to those who can pay and then to distribute the excess money to middle and low income families in financial aid and loan programs. This idea fails on three counts and absolutely strikes out.

First, this concept plays into the hands of legislators by admitting defeat in obtaining substantial state funding. If the policy is one that minimizes state support, denial of legislative budget requests becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without applying pressure on elected officials to adequately provide for higher education, other programs lobbying for support receive the governmental largess forfeited by the universities. You are sure to lose the game if you do not play.

Second, by pricing tuition so high, obtaining adequate loans to cover the ever escalating cost of college becomes more difficult for any middle income family. Higher costs mean a greater need for loans and other types of financial aid. The greater the need, the lower the income ceiling to qualify for such programs. The fewer who receive aid the greater the amount of debt needed to complete a college education. Thus, tuition must be increased once more to fund economic access, starting the cycle all over again. This is a pyramid scheme of classic design. Eventually, public universities will become less price competitive, eventually driving away even the higher income students and collapsing the pyramid, which was doomed from the beginning.

Finally, this method fails to demand the efficient and effective administration of universities. As stated in the April 13, 1992 edition of Time Magazine, universities find themselves in a period of crisis, facing huge budget cuts that require administrators to do "less with less" if they are to survive. The recession and resulting drop in state funding should have forced the state university system to re-examine its mission and reason for being. It is not enough to cut classes and limit enrollment by raising academic standards. In fact, these areas should be the last considered for a cutback.

Here lies the solution to the current pressure to raise tuition to levels never before contemplated. The original intent for the formation of land grant colleges (which include the University of Florida and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University) was to fill a void in higher education created by the lack of expansion of private institutions. The public universities would be exactly that -- public.

From this primary purpose of land grant public colleges, the state of Florida presumably developed a policy of open, affordable access to higher education. This laudable objective has worked for many years but is an endangered species today.

Since the days of Governor Leroy Collins, Florida has relied on a "2+2" system. With considerable support from the Legislature, during periods of both economic expansion and recession, this system has ensured the citizens of Florida that the American dream of a college education is obtainable. Florida's community colleges are supposed to accept any applicant with a high school diploma. Florida Statute 240.115(a) requires state universities to accept all Associate in Arts degree recipients. Therefore, an avenue to a baccalaureate degree is ensured. Open access is, and has historically been, the basis of the Florida higher education system.

Somewhere along the way the basic premise for the establishment of higher education in Florida has been lost. To maintain the open access that has made the State University System one of the best in the country, administrators must concentrate on teaching undergraduates. Research is a worthy goal, but it must be tempered in light of the basic goal of the system -- to serve the needs of the public by assuring improvements in the delivery of education services to students. Professors must return to the classroom and put aside their test tubes and library books. Tenure must be based upon a professor's performance as an instructor, not on the publication of research papers. Past methods of operation must be reevaluated in light of what was the original mission of our state universities. Even the need for continuing many of the graduate programs must be justified or those funds shifted to the undergraduate level. With some vision and new thinking, the alarming and unfair trend away from state funding can, and must be, reversed.

Consider what has occurred in recent years: Undergraduate tuition and required fees have risen from \$1,153 in 1988-89 to \$1,709 in 1992-93. The average of similar fees in the country has decreased from \$1,827 in 1988-89 to \$1,767 in 1991-92. The ranking of Florida in tuition charged in the United States has moved from 48th to an estimated mid-to-low thirties during the same four-year period.

This trend threatens the very tenets of the state plan for education as codified in Florida Statutes. The state is expected to create an educational environment to allow students to develop their full potential, to prevent dropouts in public school and in higher education and encourage Florida's talented students to attend school in Florida colleges.

How can the majority of low and middle class students develop their full potential if they cannot afford a college education? How are these goals obtained if admission to universities is curtailed due to budget cuts and if enrollment is limited for lack of space? How many professors have terminated their research to teach classes? Unless these questions are satisfactorily answered, the state plan will never be achieved.

The promise of affordable higher education was presumably etched in stone in 1991 when the Legislature enacted House Bill 2497. This measure, now Florida Statutes 240.209(3)(a), established state policy to limit tuition to 25% of the cost of education. If the Legislature did not act, the Board of Regents could raise tuition 10% per year until the cap of 25% of costs was reached. A basic problem with this is, do we really know what "costs" are?

Unfortunately, "costs" are whatever the universities say they are. The Legislature retained the power to set tuition at whatever rate was authorized in the General Appropriations Act. That is exactly what happened when tuition was raised this year to an unprecedented 28% (over the 25% maximum of "costs" set by the Legislature only one year earlier!). In 1987 the student's share of "costs" equalled less than 17%.

The Legislature cannot be allowed to break its word again. General revenue funds must be put back into the colleges and universities. Administrators must eliminate all but essential educational services. Discarding the "business as usual" mentality will reap huge gains in legislative funding. An educated work force for Florida's businesses depends upon open and economical access to higher education.

Those of us involved in, and concerned about, the education of our youth must respond today with a commitment to the fundamental basis for Florida's colleges and universities. The very future of the state of Florida is at stake.



Tate

*Stanley G. Tate is Principal in various corporations and/or partnerships including Investments Diversified Limited, Stanley Tate Builders, Inc., High Point Builders, Inc. and Tate Development Corporation. In these capacities, he has developed and constructed shopping centers, office buildings, condominiums, homes and apartment complexes. Mr. Tate is a member of the Region 1 Advisory Board of the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC) and was appointed to the Judicial Qualifications Commission by the Governor's Office. In addition, Mr. Tate is a member of the Florida TaxWatch Board of Trustees, the Board of The Florida Council of 100 and the Partners in Productivity Task Force.*

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