

Help colleges, N.J. students

1 COMMENT

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By Darryl G. Greer

If New Jerseyans are to compete and prosper in today's global economy, the state must turn around its poor performance when it comes to supporting college opportunity.

Citizens highly value New Jersey colleges and think they are doing a good job in many respects. Yet, together with business leaders, they believe that real change is needed to improve college affordability and value.

Driving home this point is a just-released "report card" on New Jersey college affordability issued by the Young Invincibles, a national student activist organization. The report gives New Jersey a grade of F on tuition; F on state spending per student; D on the financial burden on families; and D-minus on education as a state priority.

Statewide research conducted by the Center for Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance Project, where I am a senior fellow, strongly suggests some initiatives that policy makers and the schools themselves can implement to help improve the state's scores:

Lawmakers should:

Create a predictable funding rationale for higher education that supports access, affordability, and completion. The state has not had such a budget policy since the early 1990s and has been cutting funding for colleges for two decades. TAG continues to help low-income students - and others need restructuring in light of the different populations now attending college (adult and part-time students), the changes in attendance and graduation patterns, and the cost. TAG continues to be

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underfunded, and middle-income families - few of whom receive TAG grants - must depend more on loans to pay for college, creating greater personal debt. Good programs need to be made better. But this can't happen without diligent analysis of state, federal, and campus financial aid programs for a new era.

Fix the state's personnel and labor policies that drain resources. While the colleges and universities have great freedom to manage their own business affairs, state policies affecting labor contracts, fringe benefits, and retirement packages significantly affect colleges' budgets and spending obligations. Reforming personnel and labor policies and granting colleges more freedom to act would give schools a stronger hand in cost control and make them more accountable for spending on personnel, their largest single budget item.

Colleges and universities should:

Build stronger relationships with businesses as academic and funding partners. This involves restructuring the curricula to tie together both the academic and practical skills students need to achieve in college and the workplace, and to provide more internship and practical workplace experiences. One of our center's strongest findings is the desire of both students and employers to have colleges focus on specific, highly valued college outcomes, including clear writing, speaking, and problem-solving, and to marry studies with workplace skills, such as punctuality, diligence, and tolerance of diversity. Additionally, colleges should provide stronger advising and career counseling to help students make better academic choices and to help them prepare for jobs and careers.

Redesign college budgets to focus on expense, rather than revenue, and on how education gets delivered. Seventy to 80 percent of college budgets are spent on people, as well as the facilities and technology they use to teach and conduct research. The institutions, like businesses, have done much to cut energy and administrative costs. But the big savings will come from prudent planning on hiring and deployment of highly skilled faculty and staff to deliver a quality educational product. Colleges working together with labor can do more on long-term strategies to reduce costs and to increase productivity, which would benefit college affordability without sacrificing quality.

Some of these changes will take time to accomplish. However, both policymakers and colleges and universities should strive to make progress toward passing grades in 2015. This would be an important step in the right direction.

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