
In Our View: 2013 Special Session

Higher ed remains the key

The mainspring for landing the Boeing 777X in Washington is higher ed and addressing the skills gap in engineering and technology. The best social program for self-sufficiency, the best business strategy for curtailing unemployment and goosing the economy, is higher ed.

As legislators gird for a revenue battle in response to the Supreme Court's McCleary decision, Washington needs a comprehensive approach to the state Constitution's Article 9, Sections 1 and 2, on "paramount duty," an interpretation that tracks with the 21st Century. Ample provision for educating all state children, ensuring that every high school grad is college-ready, also demands ample provision for higher ed.

But over the past two decades, funding hasn't kept pace with a swelling population.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Washington ranks 37th in public bachelors' degrees produced per 1,000. Washington falls to 49th in participation in public graduate education. The state also sits, 49 out of 50, in total education funding per student. At UCLA, in a state that defines budget austerity, per-student funding is \$11,850 compared to \$6,751 at the UW.

For a generation in Washington, the cost (or funding per student) has remained flat. As state support nosedived, tuition ticked up to bridge the divide, pricing out many low and middle-income kids. In 2013, even after four years of double-digit tuition spikes, funding per student at places like the UW is \$3,000 less (!) than it was in 2008.

We know the solution. Washington should appropriate \$225 million to freeze resident undergrad tuition for the next two years, to make college a manageable option for middle class students. Student financial aid must be fully funded. And boosting capacity in engineering and computer science to align with student demand, a proposal floated by the Washington Roundtable, is the low-hanging strategy to remedy the skills crisis.

The most attractive legislative option is Gov. Jay Inslee's proposal that keeps base funding at maintenance level. It's a do-no-harm stopgap.

In Snohomish County, thanks to the leadership of WSU's Elson Floyd and Everett Mayor Ray Stephanson, there are opportunities for students completing their engineering degrees. WSU is expert at customizing programs to meet community needs, and its partnership with Everett Community College's University Center has been pretty seamless. Now, the focus is on expanded enrollment, along with kick-starting a degree program in electrical engineering. A \$10 million capital budget request for a WSU facility at EvCC is another critical step.

No more benign neglect of Washington's future. Higher ed is the cornerstone.

