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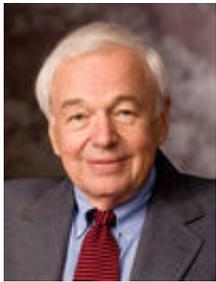
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Op-ed: State has gone from passing to failing on higher education in past 50 years

For most of the 20th century, Washington state earned a B+ on funding higher education. But the state support has eroded over the past 20 years, writes guest columnist Sid Morrison.

By Sid Morrison

Special to The Times



WASHINGTON state's constitution calls education the state's paramount duty. Now that 19th-century charge must encompass higher education, which will be required for two-thirds of all jobs created in the next 10 years.

For most of the 20th century, Washington earned a B+ on that assignment, generally supporting state colleges and universities, and the students they educated.

But 20 years of declining state funding, including the last three years of dramatic disinvestment, has eroded our support for higher education almost beyond recognition. To again earn a passing grade on the constitution's assignment, we must open the door to public higher education for many more people.

The most formidable barrier for many is tuition, up 49 percent in just three years. A cash-strapped state has turned to families to fund public higher education, backfilling big cuts in state support with tuition.

When I attended Washington State College in the 1950s, tuition and fees totaled \$82, affordable by just about any standard. Today, tuition at state universities ranges from about \$8,000 to \$12,000 per year, affordable only when compared with the price tag at private institutions.

Fast forward from my student days to 1966 through 1980, the years that I served in the state Legislature. Leadership came from the top with the strong voice of Gov. Dan Evans advocating a significant role for the state in funding higher education.

Money flowed to cover approximately 70 percent of the cost. It was an enviable investment to make, and I don't remember hearing much opposition from either side of the political aisle. However, no enduring case was ever made linking higher-education funding to the state's economic future.

State funding has long supported the most critical element of higher education -- human capital.

Universities need people to teach and advise students, maintain learning environments and conduct the business of the university. It's faculty and staff who create the rich educational environment that produces scientists, artists and leaders.

But funding for human capital is lower now than it was 20 years ago. Universities have continued to enroll students with, quite literally, no state support. Our universities have become the most efficient in the nation, spreading resources more and more thinly. That trend is not sustainable.

Another lock on the door is dwindling financial aid. Average annual loan debt is increasing. More than 25,000 students currently qualify for, but do not receive, state financial aid. There just isn't enough to go around. Universities are voluntarily plowing tuition revenue back into financial aid. But it's not enough, and the more tuition rises, the greater the need for aid.

When I served as a member of Congress, from 1981 through 1992, the cost of higher education for individual students was closing the door on the American dream. Student loans, with federal backing, increasingly became an indirect way of funding higher education.

Several specific federal programs of targeted student aid (usually named after their congressional sponsor) were created to help lower-income students. All of these federal efforts helped, but over time, loans have to be repaid, and student financial aid needs to be refreshed and backed by real money to make a dent in the real need that exists.

If we had the patience as a nation to do it, federal-stimulus dollars invested in higher education would result in genuine returns that help everyone for the lifetime of the people we train.

Determined to support a flagging economy, we have further narrowed support to subjects perceived most in need. These days it's science, technology, engineering and math. But a truly open door to education creates open minds that are free to ask questions, explore and create.

By supporting students financially and not confining them to certain fields of study, Central Washington University and other liberal-arts-based state colleges and universities have produced leaders like Ray Conner, chief executive officer of Boeing Commercial Airplanes; four-star general James Mattis; astronaut Dottie Metcalf-Lindenburger; Tommy Bahama President Doug Wood; and more than a few members of Congress. The open door works -- but only if we truly keep it open.

By the most critical measures, in the 21st century we're investing less than ever in an American institution we need now more than ever. We have priced too many out of the education they need for the success that benefits us all.

It's time to recognize that investing in public higher education produces economic vitality and the innovation that solves complicated social problems. It's time to make higher education the state budget priority we know it needs to be or risk a failing grade on our paramount constitutional duty.

Sid Morrison chairs the board of trustees at Central Washington University.