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State help for higher education dwindling, needs stabilizing

No one should be surprised that Washington State University recently announced a 16 percent tuition increase for fall 2012. Washington's public colleges and universities are responding to a 2011-13 legislative budget that cut higher education funding by \$685.5 million.

That budget included a provision for tuition increases now being enacted – estimated at \$376.4 million – to help schools partially offset the reduction in funding. Locally that will mean tuition increases of 14 percent this fall at The Evergreen State College and 12 percent at South Puget Sound Community College.

State funding of higher education has gradually declined over the past two decades, but has dramatically dropped in the past few years.

For instance, the state's portion of Evergreen's operational funding has slipped from 65 percent to 35 percent in just the past four years (it was 78 percent 20 years ago). Overall, the state's public four-year institutions have lost nearly 50 percent of their state operating funds since 2009.

Even with these planned double-digit tuition increases, state funding per student will be lower in 2012 than it was in 2008.

This year's supplemental budget, fortunately, did not cut higher education further. If the Legislature had taken more from public colleges and universities, students and parents might be facing increases of 20 percent or more in fees and tuition.

The University of Washington did increase tuition by 20 percent last year, under a special provision in the 2011 budget that allowed higher than the legislatively authorized rates if schools provided greater financial aid to low- and middle-income students.

The UW used its extra four percent last year to waive all tuition and fees for 8,500 low-income students on the Husky Promise program and expand financial aid to an additional 2,000 middle-income students, who would not have normally qualified for any financial aid.

Evergreen sets aside more than 11 percent of gross tuition revenue for student aid. About 43 percent of Evergreen's students are considered low income and even more qualify for some level of aid.

At SPSCC, more than half of students are eligible for some type of financial aid.

The vast majority of students served by Washington's public colleges and universities are state residents—about 75 percent at Evergreen and 99 percent at SPSCC. While Evergreen plans to stay about the same level, many schools are taking more nonresident students who pay about two-and-a-half times more tuition. This incremental revenue mitigates state funding cuts and helps to keep resident tuition down. These students also contribute to a diverse student body.

Higher education in this state appears to be entering a stabilization period. As the economic climate in the state slowly improves, public colleges and universities must ensure that students of all income levels continue to have access, and each institution must maintain the quality education every student expects and deserves.

The next legislature will have to address higher education funding in 2013. One item at the top of that to-do list will undoubtedly be faculty and staff salaries.

Salaries for the professors and instructors at Washington's public higher education institutions have been stagnant for three years or more, especially in relation to their peers in other states, and that's not expected to change in 2012-13. But none of the revenue from tuition increases is allowed to go toward salaries, rather it funds restoring instructors, bringing back course offerings and generally shoring up academic programs.

With the economy recovering faster on the East Coast, and for private universities, it's feared some of our state's best teachers and staff could get lured away.

While the current tuition increases were expected and planned, the legislature must find a way to bring these double-digit tuition hikes to an end. Higher education benefits our entire state — economically, socially and in our quality of life — not just the students themselves. It's time to acknowledge that benefit and stop shifting more and more of the cost onto students and families.