



Committee Examines Solutions to Rising Education Costs

JEFFERSON CITY — The cost of higher education was on the minds of many state officials as the Senate Interim Committee on the Cost of a College Education, of which I am a member, met in St. Louis on Aug. 30. That same day, the state auditor released a report underscoring the need to stem tuition increases in Missouri. Although Missouri students are paying tuition rates that are higher than ever, I am confident that committee members, with the help of education officials and other experts, can come up with new ways to fund higher education and lower costs for Missouri students and families.

The facts about Missouri tuition rates illustrate we already know — the cost of higher education has surpassed what many of us can afford. Over the past seven years, tuition increases at Missouri's public universities have outpaced inflation and growth in personal income levels. Missouri public universities' average tuition of \$5,829 exceeds the national average of \$5,491. Although Missouri's average tuition increase since 2003, approximately 27 percent, was the lowest among Big 12 Conference states, the average tuition rate remains the highest among them.

These educational institutions often raise tuition out of necessity because state funding had remained stagnant until this year's 2 percent increase. Since 1980, the state's share of funding for Missouri universities has decreased from 81.6 percent to 46 percent. Further compounding the problem, the state is providing less financial assistance to students. This affects low-income and middle-class Missourians alike. Although there are fewer needs-based grants for low-income students, middle-class students are also affected because they must rely on merit-based aid. Because most do not qualify, they have to cover the costs without assistance.

High tuition costs clearly affect Missouri families, but they also hamper state economic development. Ensuring that Missourians are able to receive a college education is an important investment in our state. Missouri needs to have an educated workforce to foster economic development, and high tuition rates can drive top students to other, more affordable states.

In an effort to find solutions to the problem of rising education costs, the Senate Interim Committee on the Cost of a College Education has been examining these issues. Committee members are looking at alternative funding structures and studying how tuition rates are set. The committee also studies the utilization of college savings plans by Missouri families and examines public grant programs and student indebtedness.

Members spent the Aug. 30 meeting discussing many of the funding problems mentioned above. In the coming weeks and months, we will continue working to come up with new solutions. Possibilities include a funding formula similar to that used for K-12 education and examining the cost-effectiveness of college programs. The committee's next meeting is Sept. 12 in Jefferson City, and members are due to report back to the Legislature on Jan. 26, 2007.

Although the cost of higher education is rising, I am confident committee members and education leaders can come up with needed solutions.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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