

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Sat, Feb. 25, 2012

## Short-sighted approach to excellence

The Miami Herald Editorial

[HeraldEd@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:HeraldEd@MiamiHerald.com)

Legislators need to do more homework before tackling the latest legislative version of a special tuition increase narrowly tailored to apply to the University of Florida and Florida State University.

The proposal by Sen. Steve Oelrich, R-Alachua, would allow any university that meets a set of educational criteria — e.g., GPA of 3.8 for incoming freshmen — to set “market-rate” tuition rates above legislatively approved increases. At present, only UF and FSU qualify.

The notion of a premium on tuition in return for a premium education has merit. College tuition in Florida remains a bargain, in spite of previous yearly hikes. Setting a standard with a tangible reward gives other universities an incentive to improve their performance.

But legislators shouldn't be the ones injecting politics into what should be a thoughtful policy set by the state universities' governing board.

There are troubling aspects to a bill that allows the marketplace to dictate tuition prices as if they were a product off the assembly line, and in the process creates the possible beginnings of a kind of educational apartheid within the university system.

This comes amid a tangle of other legislative initiatives that, taken together, represent more of a setback than a solution for the state university system and its students. A House proposal already seeks tuition increases of 8 to 15 percent across the board. Meanwhile, money for student loans and grants shrinks and the economy still lags. Then there's the push by Sen. JD Alexander, chairman of the Budget Committee, to create the state's 12th university even as the Legislature considers slashing millions of dollars from higher education — again.

Florida's university system needs an upgrade, but this piecemeal approach is no way to go about providing the state with the first-rate university system it needs to bring high-wage jobs to Florida. Legislators and Gov. Rick Scott pay a lot of lip service to that idea. It's a crowd-pleaser, and should be. Florida's future is linked directly to the quality of its higher-education system.

But when it comes to financing or “reforming” higher-ed — real reform, not just a change using that label to cover a political agenda — it pays to listen to what the powerful figures in Tallahassee do and not just what they say.

Proposed cuts in the House and Senate — \$250 million to \$500 million, respectively — would damage Florida's colleges and universities. In these pages last week, the president of Florida Atlantic University labeled the impact of the proposed cuts on her institution “alarming.” Dr. Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College, is equally worried because, he said, “disinvestment” in higher education is short-sighted.

Over the past four years, state funding for education has been cut by 24 percent, and now stands at 2003 levels. Other states have done worse because public treasuries across the country are empty. But if Mr. Scott means what he says about education being essential to attract good jobs to this state, he should level with voters about the choices.

The state can't nickel-and-dime its way to excellence.

Higher tuition is part of the solution, but Sen. Oelrich's bill, as well as Sen. Alexander's, should be deep-sixed while the Florida Board of Governors, the assigned caretaker of the higher education system, comes up with a comprehensive approach.

It's too late for this session, but it should be a priority for the next Legislature and for Gov. Scott.

---

© 2012 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.miamiherald.com>