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“Bush budget weakens state universities” [title supplied by Tallahassee *Democrat*; my title was ‘Florida’s Universities, Budgets, and Quality.’]

By Jim Cobbe

MY VIEW

Gov. Jeb Bush's budget proposals and legislative policy toward the state university system are undermining what needs to be one of the foundations of Florida's economic future: the quality of its university system.

His budget proposals include 2-percent salary increases for state employees, but exclude state university system employees. This seems very strange in Tallahassee. If someone works for a state agency he or she deserves a raise, but not if that person works for Florida A&M or Florida State University?

The governor's budget increases planned enrollment for the universities, but then does not fund the increase fully. He seems to think that if he mandates an increase in tuition, that extra money can pay for the increased enrollment.

But what about quality? If students already enrolled are to be expected to pay more, shouldn't they expect some increase in quality? If enrollment increases are funded at less than half what the funding formula says they should cost, as the governor proposes, how do universities even maintain quality?

I have a personal interest in this issue. I joined the FSU faculty in 1976, and am now chairman of the Department of Economics and president of the Faculty Senate. But I am close to drawing my pension, and after 30 years I have developed some affection for and loyalty to FSU and the state of Florida.

Each year, the state of Washington does a survey of tuition and required fees at public flagship universities and public comprehensive colleges and universities in all 50 states. In that survey, the University of Florida is considered our flagship. Florida Atlantic, Florida International, North Florida and West Florida are regarded as comprehensive institutions.

UF ranks 50th - cheapest - of the 50 flagships for in-state undergraduates, with tuition half the national average. But when it comes to out-of-state students, Florida's comprehensive public universities rank most expensive in the nation for both graduate students and undergraduates, with tuition and fees 47 percent above the national average for graduate students and 31 percent above for undergraduates. Unsurprisingly, out-of-state enrollment has been falling.

Good universities require good faculty; graduate research universities like FSU need good graduate students for those faculty to work with. Both have to be recruited nationally. High out-of-state tuition for graduate students just prices us out of the market for good students. Sun and beaches may be enough for tourists, who then pay sales tax, but they are not enough for good faculty and students, who have lots of alternatives.

As a department chair, I get told exactly what salary to offer new Ph.D. assistant professors I hire each year, based on a survey of salaries at public universities with Ph.D. programs. That starting salary for new Ph.D.s in my department has increased 36.5 percent from fall 2000 to fall 2006. The salary increases for continuing faculty - 2 or 2.5 percent most years - have totaled 16.5 percent since fall 2000, compounding the average raise.

So someone hired in fall 2000 who was meritorious enough to get average raises would be 20 percent behind a new Ph.D. I hire next fall. Faculty are like everyone else; they don't pick up and move for a few extra dollars, but when things get way out of line they do.

Yes, universities have budget flexibility. Yes, they have sources of support other than tuition and state appropriations. But they are accountable, they have been squeezed for years, and we are about as productive as we can be expected to be right now. If we don't get more resources, quality will start to decline, if it hasn't already.

The state should leave it to the universities to determine tuition other than for resident undergraduates; provide much more need-based aid for resident undergraduates; and sort out the problems of prepaid tuition and Bright Futures so that undergraduate tuition can get more in line with costs. After all, most of the benefits of a college degree go to its holder.

The state should put university employees back in "administered funds," so they are treated at least as well as ordinary state workers. The state should fully fund planned enrollment growth from general revenue, not tuition dollars. And universities should be given full flexibility on graduate and out-of-state tuition. It makes no sense to charge as much to study for a graduate degree in religion or philosophy as for an MBA.

We are in a global knowledge economy, so the quality and accessibility of higher education matter to the individual, the state and the nation. FSU may be one of the best bargains for a degree in the country. But quality counts and can erode quickly. If we keep going the way we have, the future of Florida will not be so bright.

According to the federal government, FSU spent 18 percent less on instruction per student in fiscal year 2004 than the average comparable public university. Bargain-basement higher education is probably not a good foundation for Florida's future economy.