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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

State must make college affordable

Government and parents should invest more in higher education



To thrive in our new economy, students must earn a college degree or other advanced job certification. But the rising cost of tuition may leave those graduates with a lifetime of debt unless our lawmakers and parents ensure that college can be affordable for all students.

In 2005, the average Michigan college graduate owed \$18,932 in loans, according to the Project on Student Debt. Eliminating that much debt often requires working a second job to make ends meet or sacrificing career goals to make an extra buck.

Nationally, student debt is on the rise. In 1993, less than half of four-year college graduates had student loans to pay off. By 2004, more than 66 percent of graduates owed money to creditors.

Student debt explodes

During that same decade, the amount of debt for public university graduates increased 65 percent, after accounting for inflation, with 10 percent of graduates owing more than \$33,000.

Driving this skyrocketing college debt are astronomical increases in tuition due in part to declining funding for our public universities. State funding for higher education has dropped steadily since 2002-03. That has meant tuition increases at public universities statewide.

Clearly, one solution is for the state to bolster higher education funding and make college affordable for all students, as Gov. Jennifer Granholm has suggested.

The Legislature should join with her in solving Michigan's budget crisis, including agreeing on new revenue.

But the responsibility doesn't rest on the state alone. As indicated by the results of The Detroit News/Channel 7/Your Child survey, parents need to prepare financially for their child's college education.

Parents must step up

In the survey, 73 percent of parents said their children would definitely earn a four-year degree. But only about one third of parents said they'll take whatever steps necessary to ensure it happens.

The gap in that commitment is troubling, especially considering that despite the rapidly rising costs of earning that degree, more than half of parents surveyed say college will be affordable when their child comes of age to attend.

Parents must begin planning for how to help their children pay for college. Even if parents expect their children to earn the degree on their own, they have a responsibility to explain the financial facts. It's unfair to expect an 18-year-old to understand what it will mean to them 20 years later when they're still trying to pay off their student loans.

To do nothing but wishfully think trends in college costs will change is setting up our children for a lifetime of debt – or worse, damaging their employability by eliminating college due to cost.

Invest more in higher ed

The situation will only get worse unless Michigan can get tuition under control by making a major investment in higher education and the community colleges.

Whether it's a parent setting up a college fund or legislators raising revenue to invest in our future, these decisions require willpower. We need to look no farther than Kalamazoo to see this.

Kalamazoo's education, political, business and community leaders had the courage and drive to make paying for college a priority by creating the Kalamazoo Promise. The commitment to pay for a college education for students who attend Kalamazoo public schools for their entire K-12 experience is already paying dividends for the community, with rising property values and an urban renewal unrivaled in the state.

Those results confirm what research has already shown us – dollar for dollar, an investment in education has a more positive effect on the economy than any tax cut ever could.

Beyond the economic gains, however, the greatest benefit of such investment is the hope it brings to students, knowing that a college education is on the horizon and hard work in school is all that stands between them and the doors opened by that degree. Parents and legislators can both offer that hope by investing now in our students' future.

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Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written for The News on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. The News hopes to provide a forum for discussing workplace issues that are critical to a large segment of Michigan's population, whether or not they are union members. Look for Labor Voices every Friday in The News.

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