

Peoria Journal Star, EDITORIAL, April 13, 2011 (Page 1 of 2)

Don't forget colleges' role as 'engine of economic development'

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Last month when Illinois Central College's trustees voted to increase tuition for the next school year, the reactions online to the 11th hike in 11 years were predictable:

"CUT THE EXPENSES! Stop the overpayment of professors and administrators and their bloated pensions and benefits," one anonymous commenter raged. "The board has failed in its duty and should be replaced by those that can tell why expenses are so out of control and correct it," huffed and puffed another. Their criticism is largely misplaced.

It's true, community colleges are intended to be an affordable option for students and have arguably become less so over the last decade, even if they remain a bargain compared to most public, four-year universities. Tuition has more than doubled at ICC since 2001, from \$50 per credit hour to \$102 next year; it's up more than 80 percent at Canton's Spoon River College, to \$103. Both remain below the state average of \$108.

Lay the blame for the tuition hikes on the state of Illinois. To see the decline in funding over the last 10 years for the entire network of junior colleges - about 25 percent less, amounting to \$3 million in real-dollar loss for ICC *annually*, \$625,000 a year for Spoon River - is to appreciate just how little priority Gov. Rod Blagojevich placed on maintaining the state's higher education system. After his departure from office, the financial crisis at Illinois, Inc. was so severe that state leaders have continued to subtract in their contributions to community colleges. And all this during a time in which usage of these schools has jumped substantially, as evidenced by enrollments and credit hours taken. ICC educates 3,000 more students than it did a decade ago. That has led to arguably necessary investments in more staff and facilities.

Now, community college funding is a three-legged stool between tuition, property taxes and state revenues. When one goes down, the other two must make up the difference. That problem is compounded when you have a severe recession, which hits property tax revenue. Between increased demand, decreased state funding and inflationary pressures, the likes of ICC and Spoon River have had little choice but to look to tuition. Arguably that's fair, as who should bear the funding responsibilities of the system more than its primary users?

The schools have worked to contain costs, as well. Salaries have been frozen for those not covered under existing union contracts, travel and consulting services have been cut, technology upgrades delayed, administrative operations streamlined using Six Sigma techniques. ICC has also instituted a textbook rental program for students to lighten their cost load.

The concern remains, however, that "we're out-pricing ourselves" in the long run, said Ellen Andres, chief financial officer of the Illinois Community College Board.

Beyond the students themselves, it's fair to worry more broadly about the communities these institutions serve. For example, the funding reductions have meant that Spoon River can't invest in improving its career and technical education programs, making it harder to train a primary market: "out of work individuals who need additional skills for returning to the work force" and contributing to the tax base, President Robert Ritschel said.

Peoria Journal Star, EDITORIAL, April 13, 2011 (Page 2 of 2)

If schools don't have the resources to train students for the job market - especially for emerging fields such as nursing, surgical technicians, CNAs, radiology techs - "we will as a community pay the cost for that many times over," adds ICC President John Erwin. "We'll lose businesses, our trained work force. Our young professionals will leave the community."

Granted, there are no easy solutions to this quandary in an Illinois with one of the most egregious budget situations in America. That said, decision-makers must recognize what a vicious and ultimately self-defeating circle is created when they fail to invest in the "engine of economic development" that is higher education, as Erwin defines it. Without skilled, productive, tax-paying citizens of the kind that community colleges help produce, budgets cannot get better and states cannot become more competitive. May lawmakers whose hands may be tied now at least appreciate that, and commit themselves to fixing this situation in the near future.