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Higher education // Questions abound for state's colleges

This year's budget cycle has taken many twists and turns (and might finally be reaching an end.) One of the interesting twists has been higher education.

As some will recall, the governor's original budget proposal in early February included a call for legalizing video poker. The rationale -- other than finally legalizing what apparently goes on in thousands of bars statewide -- was to provide funding for students attending schools that are part of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education.

Other proposals that emerged in the last nine months include calls for the creation of a state-run "No Frills University" to meet the needs of students in this down economy and a House Democratic budget bill that basically took all higher education money out of the general fund budget and put it in a sort of side pocket with funding sources to be determined.

None of these ideas survived to the final budget negotiations, but it's evident that everyone from the governor's office and the Legislature to the State Board of Education appears to be trying to say that maybe we need to do things differently in higher education in Pennsylvania.

We are one of the only states in the nation with the complicated system of three tiers of publicly funded universities: community colleges, the 14 SSHE schools and four "state-related" schools -- Penn State University, the University of Pittsburgh, Lincoln University and Temple University.

On top of these confusing tiers is the bigger issue that state funding for higher education has been on a downward trajectory since the 1980s.

An opinion article in the Chronicle of Higher Education last fall stated that SSHE's California University of Pennsylvania President **Angelo Armenti** said bluntly "Having watched the decline in public financial support over the 16 years since I arrived as president in 1992, I can state without fear of contradiction that we are being privatized without a plan."

Granted, part of this is due to rising costs in higher education that are growing faster than the rate of inflation, but even the State System universities that are known in the state and nationally for keeping costs lean are realizing that they have to rely more and more on tuition and fundraising -- just as private colleges do.

Given the decline in funding coupled with excessive restrictions placed on them, some of the State System schools are rightfully beginning to wonder whether they would be better off leaving the system and just becoming "state related" like Penn State.

The entire purpose of having state universities was to train the future work force of the state and contribute research in critically important areas for the state's economy. Historically, this meant agriculture, and Penn State and University of Pennsylvania still have thriving agriculture and veterinary departments, respectively.

Then the commonwealth wanted teachers, and the SSHE schools developed into teacher training institutions.

Now, the SSHE schools are all basically liberal arts colleges, and the future of Pennsylvania -- as Gov. Rendell and many commentators like to remind us -- is about high technology fields.

The critical needs of tomorrow will likely be highly skilled technology workers in areas such as biotech and green energy and nurses and medical professionals to care for our aging population. We have institutions geared toward this, but not enough, and more people are beginning to ask whether some of the SSHE schools should become "mission focused" and specialize in training certain types of students. Pennsylvania needs to re-think its higher education system and answer many important questions. How are we going to fund it? Do we have the right setup? Should all of Pennsylvania funded universities effectively become "state related"? What programs should our public dollars really go toward in the next decade?

Any candidate for governor in 2010 should be looking at these issues. The two Republicans -- Attorney General Tom Corbett and U.S. Rep. Jim Gerlach -- and the Democratic challengers yet to come should put their top policy gurus to work on this.

Getting higher education right has direct ramifications on our budget and, more importantly, on our future work force.

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