

College affordability gap needs addressing

By WILLIAM F. MESSNER
and ROBERT PURA

Like any parent reviewing a mixed progress report, we are disturbed by the "F" that Massachusetts colleges received in the category of affordability from National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPE). We hope that our concerns are shared by state legislators, who are currently at an impasse over Senate Bill 2380, a measure co-sponsored by state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, D-Amherst, that contains many possible solutions. We urge legislators to replace the unproductive silence with the joyful noise of public debate and compromise. Too much is at stake.

The legislation addresses college affordability in several ways. We believe legislators should consider these ideas before relegating them to the scrap heap of the election-year session.

For instance, this bill ties future tuition and fee increases at public colleges and universities to the



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Consumer Price Index (CPI). It also calls for the establishment of a student charges stabilization fund, to be used to reduce the need for future increases in tuition and mandatory student fees. Both provisions give a measure of stability to low- and middle-income families who depend on our state college system to breed hope for future generations.

From all indications, that hope has been slipping away for some time now. According to "The College Crunch," a study issued in June by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the cost of attending a Massachusetts' public, four-year college increased 49 percent between 2000 and 2005. During

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that same period, the median household income in Massachusetts rose by just 12 percent.

Massachusetts is not alone in this struggle. The Kennedy report also shows that, nationwide, the cost of attending a public, four-year institution rose by 32 percent while median income inched up by just 6 percent.

Massachusetts should be forging a new direction for its college students and future workforce. The state's 15 community colleges have historically helped contain the growing costs of higher education, but we, too, are at a crossroads.

If passed, Senate Bill 2380 would help community colleges stabilize stu-

dent costs by allowing them to retain their tuition and fees in a revolving trust fund, to be expended for operating expenses. This provision, which would also apply to four-year public colleges and universities, provides another tool to keep higher education affordable.

To ignore the affordability gap is to put our state's economic health in peril. According to a recently issued study by the World Institute for Strategic Economic Research (WISER), if barriers to higher education are not decisively addressed now, the New England region will suffer significant declines in the percentage of young workers holding bachelor's degrees by the year 2020. This brain drain will negatively affect the state's ability to attract better-paying jobs, a mainstay of the Massachusetts economy.

Previous generations of college students could rely on federal grants to bridge the gap. Increasingly, that aid has been replaced by loans. In 2004, a staggering 70 percent of all federal student aid came from loans; only 20 percent came from grants. This is a near reversal of the situation that many of us encountered in the 1970's, when 77 percent of all federal student aid came from grants; 20 percent

from loans. It has put an unacceptable burden on the next generation of students, workers and citizens. The average student graduating from a four-year institution in Massachusetts in 2004 carried a loan burden of \$17,353. This is particularly difficult for first-generation college students - a growing demographic in Massachusetts - who are wary about amassing such large debts before entering the workforce.

Holding down the basic cost of our state's colleges and universities is one way to fight this trend. Senate Bill 2380 contains some helpful suggestions for doing just that. We hope to hear more.

We know that the projected cost of Senate Bill 2380 has given many legislators pause. We should not let that pause resign itself to silence. We know, too, that many of the bill's provisions will spark heated debates. We urge legislators to use those debates to forge compromises.

We would expect no less from our students.

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