

# Cheaper, not better: Universities need tuition-raising authority

*TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT EDITORIAL, NOVEMBER 23, 2008*

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Florida has to do something. It can no longer continue to charge the lowest tuition and required fees among the nation's public universities and be able to brag about the quality of education our young people are receiving.

It is regrettable — as are so many other instances where the unreality of getting something for nothing rears its ugly head — but Gov. Charlie Crist's unexpected call Thursday to allow universities to raise their tuition is essential.

Some critics have said that any tuition increase will limit access, and the governor has in the past resisted this move.

But another searing reality is that access has already been limited because institutions such as Florida State University have had to turn students away because they haven't had the dollars to keep up with enrollment demands for more than five years.

Mr. Crist's proposal has to clear the Legislature, which could possibly agree to the plan even though it takes away some of its current authority over tuition. The plan would let the universities propose, and the Board of Governors approve, limited tuition increases over the next seven years — bringing in an estimate \$72 million the first year.

Florida universities have the worst faculty-student ration in the nation and also a brain drain in progress. This addition could help with the faculty shortage and thereby the shortage of classes students need — and graduating in a timely manner saves students money. About 30 percent of the tuition differential, however, will go to need-based financial aid.

Bob Graham, Florida's former U.S. senator and governor during the State University System's better days, is among the skeptics who see lawmakers agreeing to only a kind of bait-and-switch — saying "yes" to letting universities increase tuition and then pulling out a share of its own general revenue contribution to higher education. Such shenanigans aren't unheard of.

FSU President T.K. Wetherell said Friday, however, that lawmakers don't have any money to enhance higher education right now in any case. "At some point there will be money and then we'll start lobbying for the (state) dollars," he said, adding that for the time being the tuition increase is the only avenue.

So, short of invoking some sort of reform that would bring in revenue from, for example, a higher tax on cigarettes or taxing some services, lawmakers are going to feel pressure to give universities a little money-raising flexibility.

Many of the smaller institutions likely won't use the option to raise their tuition by much, or will adjust to reflect their particular marketplace. Florida A&M President James Ammons said, however, that he supports Crist's plan to help retain faculty and keep the quality of education from being even more at risk.

For those universities that do raise the tuition, the estimated increase would be no more than a \$15 per credit hour for undergraduates — including all those on Bright Futures scholarships who would pay only the differential. Those now on prepaid tuition plans sold prior to July 2007 would see no increase.

And even if the tuition-raising options goes into play, adding maybe 3 percent to the total cost of attendance, Florida will still have the lowest tuition rates in the nation. Mr. Wetherell said FSU, with regard to access for minorities in particular, will continue its CARE (Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement) program, which recruits, retains, and succeeds in high graduation rates of African-American students who may have been disadvantaged due to economic, educational or cultural circumstances but whose backgrounds demonstrate a strong desire to succeed.

As Mr. Crist put it with undeniable accuracy: "A well-educated work force opens the door to endless opportunities for every Floridian, and for the Sunshine State." In these enormously difficult times, this is one "user fee" that will have such a tremendous payoff for the user — and the state — that it cannot be considered anything but a solution to a destructive problem that has lingered far too long.