

Brains drained

Legislators show scorn for universities

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The antipathy that House Republicans show toward Florida's state universities is breathtaking.

Their plan quite simply forces our public universities to undermine even star-studded and economy-enriching programs ranging from oceanography — important in a state surrounded on three sides by water — to hospitality management — notice we're a major tourism state.

As the machinations in budget-writing continued this week, it appears that even the Senate — which has shown the most fiscal maturity and farsightedness to date — stands ready to bow to House leaders and their eye-on-the-next-election starvation diet.

Many members may be smart and quick with the glib remark, but as a group, House leadership is showing itself to be not deeply thoughtful — as one despairing observer put it, "not deeply rooted in ideas."

Board of Governors Chairman Sheila McDevitt said Thursday that she's pleased to see the Legislature approved tuition flexibility for the universities, but adds "tuition helps, but it will be four years before you see much effect."

Likewise, federal stimulus dollars, perhaps \$150 million systemwide that is expected to come Florida's way, lasts just two years. And that isn't anywhere near up to the task of stopping the hemorrhaging of professors and, accordingly, the academic reputation that draws both students and research grant money that's so vital.

Given that Florida continues to have not only an expensive and easygoing Bright Futures program but also the lowest tuition rates in the nation, even slowly bringing tuition up to a national average won't begin to fund this economic engine called higher education.

"We're appreciative of the stimulus money," Ms. McDevitt added, "but you still have to look toward a predictable source of revenue, and that's General Revenue." Right now the House sets GR at 26.4 percent less than it was last year — and that's on top of reductions the previous two years.

By comparison, the Senate's 8.6-percent cut in GR over last year seems almost benign. And yet Senate President Jeff Atwater on Wednesday was cozying up to the House Speaker Larry Cretul, giving every indication the Senate was ready to kick universities under the bus.

Presidents of the state's universities stood as one on Thursday, expressing their frantic dismay over what's happening to their budgets. Florida A&M University at last got the memo that it is also in grave trouble if an expected \$22 million is slashed from its budget. Florida State and the University of Florida have, on the other hand, been thundering through the halls of the Capitol for weeks, trying to get the attention of the mighty. But so far, to little avail.

As one distinguished professor said, "The future of the state is in energetic young people with ideas. They're the basic building blocks of the future, but they aren't going to stick around Florida; they're going to go."

One has to wonder where the majority of Florida legislators got their education. The majority must have found economics, history and logic way over their heads — while doing very well indeed in theater of the absurd.