

26 December, 2003

Our view: Higher education must remain affordable

St. Cloud Times Editorial Board

Editor's note: This is the third of a six-part series examining key challenges Central Minnesota faces in 2004. Today's topic is higher education.

Offsetting the rising cost of tuition for students is among the biggest challenges institutions of higher education face in 2004.

Colleges and universities nationwide are bumping up their prices in an effort to stay afloat amid increasing state deficits and decreasing state aid. St. Cloud State University increased tuition by 15 percent, its third double-digit increase in three years.

Even though students are paying more, tight budgets continue to create large class sizes and stretched resources.

Educators, administrators, students and the communities in which they operate must work to prevent higher education from becoming an opportunity only high-income families can afford.

This will take some creative thinking and prioritizing. St. Cloud State and St. Cloud Technical College already have tapped creative solutions to ease budget constraints. In the summer, both went to four-day workweeks. Educators and students should track down financial opportunities such as grants and scholarships.

Diversity

Diversity continues to be a challenge for colleges and universities, including St. Cloud State.

This last year saw interesting developments in the continuing goal to promote tolerance on campus. Among them, university President Roy Saigo disbanded the Independent Review Committee charged in December 2002 with reviewing four reports on diversity. The group was supposed to develop a plan of action to ease tensions on campus but failed to meet deadlines and came up with only a preliminary report.

So, Saigo chose to relieve members of the committee and adopt parts of the preliminary report. These seem rather obvious:

- Information about what to do when facing harassment or discrimination should be available to all members of the campus community.
- Allegations of anti-Semitism, discrimination and retaliation at St. Cloud State should be thoroughly investigated. Problems should be identified, and solutions should be implemented.
- All members of the campus community should be free to celebrate recognized religious or cultural holidays according to their custom.

It's nice to see the university and the president putting an end to the studies and moving forward with implementation. We urge educators to remain focused and do more than the obvious. We also encourage them to use a \$24,000 grant from Otto Bremer Foundation wisely. That grant will contribute training and workshop opportunities, but will be renewed only if the university shows satisfactory progress.

Lobbying

Finally, St. Cloud State student government's push to sever ties with the Minnesota State University Student Association should be followed in 2004 with a plan to ensure the university receives aggressive, effective representation at the Legislature.

Students voted this month to leave MSUSA. Student leaders must now request a change in the state statute requiring universities governed by Minnesota State Colleges and Universities to belong to MSUSA.

Student leaders should not wait on that decision to start researching their options.

Because of the growing connection among the Legislature, local governments and institutions of higher education, it's essential students have a plan to be heard loud and clear at the Legislature.