

“To a Higher Degree” column 3/23/2014

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While many factors go into a student’s choice of what college or university to attend, cost is an increasingly strong influence in enrollment decisions. Students and their families are seeking educational opportunities that offer the greatest value, and campuses are putting greater focus on containing costs while maintaining high quality educational programs.

“College cost and financial aid issues have become even more salient in students’ college choice process,” according to a Chronicle of Higher Education report about an annual survey of college freshman released earlier this month and conducted by an arm of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

A year ago the White House announced the launch of the College Scorecard, aimed at giving families a tool for identifying colleges and universities that would offer the best value based on cost, graduation rates, median amount borrowed and loan default rates for individual institutions.

Public higher education welcomes the drive to make colleges and universities more accessible and more accountable – to be affordable while maintaining academic excellence. State and national government and education leaders are calling for solutions, and conversations about how to tackle this complex issue are taking place on campuses, higher education organizations, and government offices across the country.

For vibrant campuses such as St. Cloud State, which offer broad and accessible educational opportunities for today’s students as well as future generations, keeping tuition costs affordable is of vital importance. This is not a job we can do without help.

We appreciate that Gov. Mark Dayton and the Minnesota Legislature have turned greater focus on what many see as the logical answer: reversing the trend in the percentage of state funding that is allocated to higher education. Doing so takes pressure off tuition and fulfills the commitment Governor Dayton and Minnesota lawmakers are making to increase access to education for all Minnesotans.

In its Public Policy Agenda released in January, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities stated, “The top priority for American public higher education leaders today must be a relentless call for states to provide sufficient, consistent and sustained state funding in order to keep college affordable for all students, especially those from modest economic circumstances.”

Included in proposals for this legislative session from Governor Dayton and lawmakers is much-needed funding for Minnesota State Colleges and Universities. We greatly appreciate their unwavering support

for Minnesota State Colleges and Universities and the critical role we play in ensuring access to an extraordinary education for all Minnesotans.

This focus on access, affordability and accountability takes into account a common understanding of the university's impact on the wider community - an understanding that embraces our roles as an economic engine, a catalyst for social change and growth, a source of enrichment and entertainment, a place of opportunity for every member of the community and a partner in tackling the toughest challenges of the day.

As St. Cloud State and its sister public colleges and universities have evolved academically and culturally, we are being challenged by our many constituencies to be a university that looks ahead to the future and to be an institution that is responsive to the changes around us.

The Itasca Project, a collaborative effort among higher education institutions, employers and regional communities in Minnesota, has called for greater state support for educating the workforce of tomorrow. "Higher education is critical for the health and prosperity of our Minnesota communities," the project's task force concluded. "Minnesota's historical strengths in higher education give it an advantage, yet there is an urgent need to take strategic action and make investments to create a next level of excellence in Minnesota higher education."

It is imperative that public colleges and universities receive the support necessary for keeping tuition affordable while maintaining high quality faculty and staff, programs, facilities, technology and other resources to continue offering our students the education that will prepare them to succeed in the workplace and in life.

We are grateful to Governor Dayton and Minnesota legislators who recognize the importance of investing in the future success of our students and the communities that are served by public colleges and universities.