

The Crisis in Texas Higher Education

By Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.

No one who monitors education issues can help but to be impressed at the seriousness with which Texans have been working to improve higher education in the state. In the past few years, in Austin and beyond, there has been much constructive debate over how our public colleges and universities can increase quality and accessibility while lowering costs for students and taxpayers.

Such collective resolve among taxpayers, legislators, university personnel, and others is good news: it is essential to discovering and implementing solutions to our troubles.

The bad news is that these troubles are acute, worsening, and nationwide.

A study just released by the nonprofit group, Complete College America, analyzed education trends in Texas and 32 other states. The results for Texas are disheartening.

They're disheartening enough that the September 27 New York Times story on the study highlights our state: "In Texas . . . of every 100 students who enrolled in a public college, 79 started at a community college, and only two of them earned a two-year degree on time; even after four years, only seven of them graduated. Of the 21 of those 100 who enrolled at a four-year college, five graduated on time; after eight years, only 13 had earned a degree."

Given what it labels the "shockingly low" graduation rates in Texas and nationwide,

the CCA report concludes by warning that, without "urgent" action, "today's young people will be the first generation in American history to be less educated than their predecessors."

In our increasingly competitive global marketplace, with its ever-growing need for better-educated employees, we ignore this warning at the peril of our children's future.

According to the report, in 10 years, 60 percent of all new jobs will require a college degree. Currently, 31 percent of Texans aged 25-34 have a college degree. The average four-year graduation rate across Texas public universities is below 30 percent. Even at Texas' two flagship universities, the four-year graduation rates are barely above 50 percent, with UT-Austin at 53 percent and Texas A&M at 50.7 percent.

Unless we move quickly both to increase graduation rates and to shorten the time it takes to complete a degree, today's young people might also be the first generation in our history to be poorer than its predecessors. And this economic decline will be especially prominent among Texas' Hispanics and African-Americans, as the CCA study finds that students in these groups suffer still-longer periods to graduate and still-lower graduation rates.

More bad news that Texans must address quickly is the skyrocketing cost of public higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics; the average tuition at Texas public universities has increased by more than 5 percent

every year since 1994.

These increases cannot be explained solely or even primarily as the result of state budget cuts. Adjusting for inflation, state appropriations to public higher education more than doubled between 1990 and 2009. Over the last four decades, taxpayer support of public higher education has, at the very least, kept pace with inflation and enrollment growth.

These data demonstrate that the Texas Legislature has been fadronstingy. Texas universities must search elsewhere to explain escalating costs.

This search must also address the problem of massive student debt.

Total student loan debt in this country surpasses credit card debt. Student loan debt for the 2010 graduating class was about \$22,000 per student at UT-Austin and \$21,200 at Texas A&M. The national average was \$24,000.

In hindsight, this explosion in student debt was predictable. Given the double blow of rapidly rising tuitions and lengthier graduation times, the increased burden had to fall somewhere,

It has fallen on our students.

If we hope to avert this crisis, the duty falls on our legislators and universities to accelerate their efforts at education reform. Texas students deserve no less.

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From Page: 6
10/16/2011
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