

Invest in Florida's public colleges

The Miami Herald Editorial
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It's hard to argue with Gov. Rick Scott's challenge to Florida's four-year colleges and community colleges to create \$10,000 four-year degrees in areas that virtually guarantee a job after graduation. Making higher-education affordable so that students aren't strapped with loans after graduation is a laudable goal.

But here's the rub: Florida's colleges and universities already are among the cheapest in the nation — they're not the for-profit colleges causing much of the problem nationally for students overwhelmed by loans.

And here's the insult: For the past six years the state has cut funding for state colleges to perilous levels, and this past legislative session the governor supported whacking \$300 million from the state university system, which runs separately from state colleges.

Plus, Gov. Scott has opposed raising fees at state universities as they try to counter budget cuts. Yet a task force he appointed on higher education reform recently recommended that Florida's 12 universities be able to increase tuition under certain circumstances.

The governor began his public relations sweep in central Florida on Monday to hype his proposal, which would amount to cutting tuition and fees by almost one-third at stellar nationally renown schools like Miami Dade College.

"As I travel the state, families tell me that they care about three things: getting a good job, a quality education and enjoying a low cost of living," the governor said at the Clearwater campus of St. Petersburg College.

He's right. Floridians have also told pollsters they want the state to invest in education — not gut it.

Broward College officials told Herald education reporters that the college might be able to offer \$10,000 four-year degrees in a few limited fields: information technology, supervision and management and transportation and logistics. But that would mean the state couldn't continue to cut higher-education funding as it has been doing.

Indeed, the goal of a \$10,000 degree might well be attainable if the Florida Legislature returns to previous public funding levels for higher education now that the state's economy is turning around and revenues are increasing so that there won't be a budget deficit going into next year's session. But if the governor plans to cut public funding some more and push for lower tuition rates, something will have to give, and that something will be quality.

Already, Florida colleges and universities are among the most affordable, and there has been a brain drain of top professors in their fields leaving for other states that pay them more.

Florida Board of Education member Roberto “Bob” Martinez of Miami noted in a letter to the governor last week that Scott’s proposal “will be perceived as a gimmick pretending to be a policy used as a sound bite, and merely copying the plan announced last year by Gov. Perry of Texas.”

Mr. Martinez, a Republican appointee, is telling it straight.

Reducing the burden on the families of college students is an important goal, but this proposal, even if it can be achieved in limited academic areas, would not help most students.

Florida needs to invest in education spending. As it is, the \$10,000 price tag for a college education was achievable as recently as the 2009-10 academic year. But with successive cuts from Tallahassee, state colleges have been forced to raise tuition to keep their programs going.

Let’s get serious about education by investing in our students.