Give Florida's universities a needed raise

By Florida's University Presidents, Special to the Times

Published Monday, March 16, 2009

For many parents and students, universities are at their best when they offer small classes, great professors and lots of choices.

Others define great universities as sources of new ideas, technologies and a skilled work force — all key in an economic downturn.

With regional campuses, research institutions and liberal arts colleges, Florida's 11 public universities are diverse. But we believe that as a group, we should meet all expectations in the Sunshine State. That is why we urge Floridians to help alleviate a major shortfall in higher education dollars by supporting a bill that would give universities flexibility to raise their tuitions up to a cap.

Whether at the University of Florida in Gainesville (enrollment 51,474) or New College of Florida in Sarasota (enrollment 767), students hope to benefit from the same touchstones of a memorable college experience.

An intimate classroom environment. A teacher who knows and enthuses about her subject. An assortment of classes and degrees rich enough to make it tough to choose.

This was never easy to pull off during Florida's years of rapid growth. But now, cultivating this environment has become nearly impossible. Two trends are to blame: Florida's low tuition, and major budget cuts in the past two years.

Attending college in Florida has always been a bargain. Our public universities' average tuition of about $3,800 is about half the nation's average tuition. And many of our students don't pay anywhere near $3,800. That's because the Bright Futures Scholarship Program or other scholarships foot so much of their bills. In fact, when federal and state aid are factored in, students in Florida only pay 10 percent of the cost of earning their degrees.

There's nothing wrong with being a bargain — as long as students can get a solid education.

The problem is, that can't continue. Forced against the wall by the economic downturn, the state has slashed $285 million from higher education funding, leading to widespread layoffs, hiring freezes and cutbacks.

There are fewer classes, and more students packed into them. In libraries, students and scholars scour a shrinking collection of databases and journals. Several universities have frozen or cut freshman enrollment, squeezing already pinched access for high school students. All this in a period when applications typically rise, as unemployed workers seek to improve their marketability.

Although next year's budget remains in flux, universities are anticipating harsh reductions. Elimination of entire departments — even whole colleges — is in the offing.
If these trends continue, they will erode the quality of a Florida degree. That will devalue graduates' qualifications in the eyes of graduate schools — and employers.

But the threat goes beyond education. Florida faculty bring into the state an estimated $1.2 billion annually in federal and private research grants. That money does far more than pay for equipment, lab technicians or graduate students. It leads to innovations that become the seeds of start-up companies and expansion of existing companies. That boosts high-skilled, high-paying jobs and helps Florida stay in front of industry trends — for example, green energy technology.

If this seems removed from the tuition authority bill making its way through the Legislature, it is not.

Fewer, less experienced faculty not only mean fewer classes and fewer degrees, they also mean fewer research dollars, fewer innovations, less economic activity. Student and entrepreneur, in other words, are in the crosshairs.

The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, and state Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, would allow universities to raise their per-credit tuition as much as 15 percent annually until it reaches the national average. The bill does not require a tuition hike. Instead, it gives each individual university the ability to price its tuition according to local market value. An amount equal to 30 percent of the added tuition would go to need-based financial aid.

Will the bill, which is supported by Gov. Charlie Crist and the Senate Higher Education Committee, solve all universities' problems? Absolutely not.

But even if budget cuts are as severe as predicted, it will allow us to devote extra dollars to the areas each university feels are most important. As Florida struggles with the recession, that will enable universities to remain valuable partners in its recovery — as educators for Florida's young people, and as innovators for its economy.

Submitted by Florida A&M president James H. Ammons; Florida Atlantic University president Frank T. Brogan; Florida Gulf Coast University president Wilson G. Bradshaw; Florida International University president Modesto A. Maidique; Florida State University president T.K. Wetherell; New College of Florida president Gordon E. "Mike" Michelson Jr; University of Central Florida president John C. Hitt; University of Florida president J. Bernard Machen; University of North Florida president John A. Delaney; University of South Florida president Judy L. Genshaft; University of West Florida president Judith A. Bense.