

Academic imbalance

Ridge would boost tilt of financial aid to wealthier students at private colleges

There has long been a tug-of-war between Pennsylvania's public and private institutions of higher learning for the hearts and minds of governors and state lawmakers.

For some time now, that is a battle that the influential private colleges and universities have been winning, mostly by default, but perhaps soon by design.

The political aspects of this battle are shaped to a considerable degree by an oddity of Pennsylvania politics - recent governors, including the current one, Tom Ridge, are all products of private, out-of-state institutions. In other states, that singular distinction would be a political liability; in Pennsylvania it seems to be an advantage.

The state thus has had a series of governors who have been unfamiliar with, if not downright unsympathetic to, public higher education, which consists of the 14-campus State System of Higher Education and the four state-related institutions; Penn State, Temple, Pitt and Lincoln.

And perhaps no recent governor has been less sympathetic than Harvard-educated Ridge, who told a gathering of editorial writers last week that the state has an obligation maintain the infrastructure of the state schools, but that the bulk of dollars for higher education should be directed by the students themselves by choices they make in selecting which universities and colleges to attend.

This sounds deceptively simple and fair, except that the end result is to eliminate the choice most other states offer -- an affordable education at a public university. Pennsylvania ranks second only to Vermont in the country in charging the highest tuition rates at public universities. Student of this state have a choice between attending a high-priced private university or a high-priced public university.

Making matters worse is that Ridge is making decisions about funding higher education on the basis of an erroneous assumption. That assumption, which he voiced at his meeting with editorial writers and which has been bandied about by officials of private institutions, essentially is this: Students from wealthier families now predominate at public universities, while poorer students are attending private universities.

This would mean, if it were true, that tax-supported public institutions are serving the people who can best afford a college education, while the privates are catering to the needs of those who can least afford to go to college.

Figures compiled by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency for students attending college this year, however, appear to contradict this notion. The average family income of students attending private institutions and receiving state grants is \$34,800, according to PHEAA, compared to \$26,500 for grant students attending the State System and \$27,600 for grant students at state-related universities.

And that's not all. Students attending private institutions received 40.8 percent of the state grants provided through PHEAA in 1993-94, compared to 16.6 percent for State System students and 25.4 percent of state-related students. And their grants were higher, with an average of \$2,137 going to students at private universities, compared to \$1,399 for State System students and \$1,711 for students at state-related institutions.

It is these grants that Ridge proposes to provide to an additional 10,000 students, bringing the total 162,000 grants next year. We don't have any problem with this, except for the fact that the public institutions are being asked to hold the line on tuition increases to 4.5

percent to qualify for an additional \$100 in state funding per student, half of the incentive they received last year. In addition, Ridge would provide the State System with no funds to address a long list of physical deficiencies in facilities on the 14 campuses, the same infrastructure for which Ridge says he sees a state responsibility.

Despite the increase in student grants, the real consequence of the Ridge higher-education strategy is to further burden students from working-class families with huge amounts of debt to attend college.

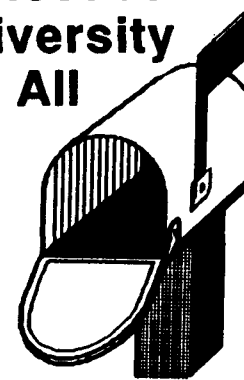
Meanwhile, the State System is shrinking in enrollment, turning away thousands of qualified students, even as the state enters what is expected to be a long phase of rising demand for a college education.

Somehow we manage to find huge sums for the permanent care of the commonwealth's most odious citizens, but for some unexplained reason there is never enough to do a decent job of providing affordable public universities for those who want to better themselves through education.

The governor's call for creating economic opportunity in Pennsylvania doesn't quite resonate the way it should when he proposes to continue the practice of strapping public higher education for funds.

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