

OPINION

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WEEKLY COLUMN | SEN. TOM O'MARA

A hub of worldwide research

It's worth taking a closer look at the economic recovery blueprints being carried out by each of the state's 10 regional economic development councils (regionalcouncils.ny.gov).

Several common themes emerge, but not a single one stands out more prominently than this one: the importance of building partnerships between higher education and private industry.

Take the Southern Tier regional council as an example. The council's overall vision statement leads off this way: "Building on a strong foundation of existing businesses and higher education institutions, the Southern Tier region uses a collaborative approach to leverage its globally competitive advantages to attract talent and investment for the development of industry clusters."

Focus on the key ideas brought together in just that one sentence. Existing businesses. Higher education. Strong foundation. Collaborative approach. Globally competitive advantages. Attract talent and investment. Industry clusters.

That's where we're heading. That's the future. It's happening all over New York State, and it's happening in important ways right here at home.

I'll stay focused on the Southern Tier Regional Council. Its vision for this area's economic future is being constructed upon a regional approach, anchored by a Corning-Ithaca-Binghamton triangle that offers all of our communities the chance to benefit from a university-private sector foundation like we've never seen before.

The Southern Tier council recently put forth for the state's consideration what it calls the "Southern Tier Regional Incubator Plan." It's a two-fold strategy that:

1.) zeroes in on the more than \$1.5 billion already collectively being invested by many of the triangle's leading research institutions, including Cornell University, Corning Incorporated, the Ceramics Corridor Innovation Center in Painted Post and Binghamton University, and

2.) seeks to fashion and fit this existing commitment to research and utilize the physical infrastructure already in place to help this region remake itself, become a "Southern Tier Innovation Hot Spot" and undergo the revitalization so many imagine.

We're talking about revitalization through the commercialization of



TOM OMARA

incubator facilities, by encouraging new entrepreneurs and start-up high-tech companies, by attracting new capital investment, energizing workforce development, and leveraging state programs and services to keep advancing our future -- and our fortunes.

The potential is enormous. It's about creating good jobs and long-term job security for workers and their families. It's about creating the economic opportunities that will keep the incredible young talent already living and learning at our colleges and universities living and working and raising families in our communities throughout the next generation.

And it's about continuing to leverage ongoing state and federal investments that can lead us in so many exciting, significant and diverse directions.

Just last week, for example, it was announced that nearly \$1 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture through the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004 is going to support 11 research projects underway at Cornell University, whose College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) is the second-largest undergraduate college and the third-largest college of its kind in America. It's been ranked time after time as the best college of agriculture and related sciences in the country.

It's this type of nuts-and-bolts research and development that, while it may never show up in the headlines, represents the underpinning of so much of what's been responsible for keeping New York an agricultural leader for so long.

It's important work and we're fortunate to have it taking place at Cornell University, at Corning Inc., at the Ceramics Corridor Innovation Center and at so many other regional institutions. It has the potential to carry us a long way -- in even more important and successful ways than most of us realize or truly appreciate.

State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents New York's 58th Senate District, which includes Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler and Yates counties, and part of Tompkins County.

ANOTHER VIEW



PRO VS. CON

Should public college be free for all qualified applicants?

Pro: Removing tuition hurdle means upward mobility

By Don Kusler

State universities and community colleges should offer free tuition to all students who academically qualify for admission.

Our current insufficient, inefficient patchwork of college aid relies increasingly on loans that saddle graduates with too much debt and too few options once they enter the workforce.

Tuition-free and loan-free college education would not only give a vital boost to aspiring students of modest and middle means, but make sure we don't cheat our society of its next great leader because she or he faced a purely economic bar to college admission.

Recognizing a democracy's basic need for an educated citizenry, our nation has tried through most of its history to make college more accessible and affordable.

We've enacted laws ranging from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and Morrill Act of 1862, which helped create the relatively low-cost state college system; to the post-World War II GI Bill and Higher Education Act of 1965, which gave direct aid to students. As a result, ours was the first society in human history with a broad participation in higher education.

That policy of widening college access was abandoned beginning in the 1970s. Spurred on by faulty theories on how best to aid low-income students and by state governments' budget crises - which were fueled in part by profligate tax-cutting - state colleges began to receive less public funding and in turn demand more from students and their families in the form of tuition and fees. Meanwhile, direct aid - such as Pell Grants - began to shrink and student debt to grow.

The results have been predictably bad.

Collective student debt now tops \$1 trillion, greater than all credit card debt combined. More and more promising students are making the economic calculation that college just isn't worth the price.

Luckily, some far-seeing reformers have set out to change that calculation. The Oregon legislature recently created a commission to consider a plan - "Pay It Forward, Pay It Back" - that would finance tuition-free attendance at the state's four-year and community colleges via a 3 percent surtax on the income of graduates, a system that already works well in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Robert Samuels, president of the University Council-American Federation of Teachers, proposed in a recent academic journal that all college education could be made tuition-free and loan-free simply by using more efficiently the public resources already dedicated to higher education.

He calculated that it would cost the government a hefty \$130 billion a year to directly pay the tuition of the approximately 6.5 million undergraduates in public four-year colleges and 4.3 million in community colleges. But that's what Washington and the states already spend on higher education, if you add together the cost of Pell Grants, loan guarantees and state assistance.

More important, free higher education would restore our nation's vaunted but now mostly absent social mobility, create a more capable workforce, better prepare Americans for the duties of citizenship - and make sure that smart, ambitious young Americans from any side of town can fulfill their dreams.

Don Kusler is executive director of Americans for Democratic Action.ag

Con: Shifting tuition to taxpayers may derail innovation

By Andrew P. Kelly

Skyrocketing college tuition threatens educational opportunity in America.

While median household incomes have shrunk since the economic crisis, published tuition at public colleges has jumped 25 percent since 2008, largely in response to state funding cuts.

Net prices - what students pay after grants and scholarships - have not risen as quickly thanks to a one-time, unprecedented increase in Pell Grant spending. But with income and tuition moving in opposite directions, students increasingly face a bleak choice: take on crippling debt or forgo college altogether.

Some say the solution is to create a "public option" for higher education - to reallocate federal student aid dollars toward a European-style system of free public colleges.

While it's tempting to assume that tuition-free public colleges would solve our higher education problems overnight, merely moving resources around is no panacea for rising costs and low rates of student success.

First, a public option would change who pays for higher education, but not necessarily how much it costs to provide it.

Economists argue that traditional higher education is like other service industries: because the product entails interaction with highly educated labor in small groups, it is difficult to raise productivity.

As wages rise in the rest of the economy, colleges must pay employees more even though their output doesn't increase, leading to higher costs.

Simply shifting who pays the bill will do little to change this equation. So while existing federal and state investments might cover the cost of a public option today, those same sums won't go as

far next year or the year after unless colleges also make changes to their cost structure. Taxpayers would have to foot an increasingly large bill.

Second, it's not clear that a public option would automatically raise student success. Take California's community colleges, which have the lowest published tuition in the nation - \$1,135 in 2011-12 - and are essentially free to many students who qualify for Pell Grants.

A 2012 analysis by the Institute for a Competitive Workforce found that retention and completion rates across California's community colleges were above the national average. But completion rates were even higher at two-year colleges in Wisconsin and North Dakota, where tuition is two to three times as high and Pell Grant recipients make up a larger percentage of enrollments.

The point isn't that tuition prices don't matter. But these outcomes do suggest that pushing tuition to zero may not be a silver-bullet solution to lackluster student success.

Third, many consumers equate high tuition prices with quality. So even if there were a public option that costs nothing, many affluent families would likely still opt to send their kids to private colleges, leaving less advantaged students in the public option. Increased sorting by income could further exclude lower income students from the "peer effects" that are an important part of educational quality.

Solving the college cost crisis will require fundamental changes in cost structures, not just tuition prices. To get there, leaders need to foster competition across all types of providers, not create a public monopoly.

Andrew P. Kelly is director of the Center for Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute.