

Unnatural disaster in our colleges

The worsening money crisis is a smack upside the head of the college classes.

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I've lived in Florida for years now - I thought I was well prepared for disaster.

But at this moment there's a catastrophe descending upon us the likes of which I've never seen, doing statewide damage Floridians will pay for dearly in the future. This tempest, started in the eye of Jeb Bush, has picked up wind with Gov. Charlie Crist and is now blowing away not just the frame but the foundation of our state's higher education system. I don't know if there are enough D batteries in the world to power us through this mess and what it's going to cost Florida's citizens in the long run.

And if the absurdity that is the proposed property tax cut goes through, there won't be much left but the crying. Maybe Donald Trump, just one of the nonresident Florida property owners throwing cash at the ad campaign to push Amendment 1, should sink that money into Red Cross education packages - we're going to need them.

I see the wreckage from the ground level as I teach in the English Department at Florida State University. Before Crist showed up, Florida's public universities were already picked to the bone, the carcass set to boil. As educators, we're proud to have done our very best with the sow's ear the Legislature has handed us time and again over the last decade. But the truth is, even before the 8 percent budget slashing recently visited upon our public universities, FSU already had the very worst student-teacher ratio in the country, the kids packed into our classrooms like clowns jammed into a Shriner's car.

My colleagues and I regularly have to scrounge desks from other rooms just to have enough seats for all the bodies there when class begins. As the Legislature's ax continues to swing, I can't imagine where we'll put even more students as our class sizes explode yet again.

It's a shameful fact, and not one of our own making, that FSU has racked up a number of such God-awful distinctions. We rank at or near the bottom in every national study measuring a public university's "financial resources." In civilian speech, that means the plug nickels we're tossed by the state to spend on educating students and providing the faculty to do so. The pitiful funding from our Legislature, combined with their unwillingness to let us control our tuition rate, means we're now as dismal as recent disaster areas like Louisiana and Mississippi in per capita spending on students.

In the meantime, we already charge the lowest tuition of any public university in the entire country. Not only is our tuition going at Made-in-China prices, but FSU is also stuck picking up the cost for all kinds of expensive freebies other public universities don't typically pay for, like being the sole Internet provider to more than 40,000 students on our campus. But we're not allowed to charge any of the technology or facility fees other public universities charge, translating into millions of dollars lost to FSU annually. As Larry Abele, FSU's provost, stated recently to the Board of Trustees when delivering the dire news of the projected \$30-million cut to our permanent budget, "The Legislature has put us in an impossible position."

Consider that a single year at a private kindergarten in Tallahassee costs double what FSU is allowed to charge in annual tuition. That makes for a Research 1 university without the basic means to educate our young people to compete in a brutal job market and tightening global economy. And what our budding scientists, business entrepreneurs and teachers lose, we as a state definitely lose. That is, except for our wealthiest citizens who send their little darlings as far away from Florida's public universities as their grades and daddy's influence can carry them. At bottom, the funding of our universities is a class issue, straight up. The question is what kind of education do middle class and even poor kids have a right to? Remember when a decent education wasn't just the privilege of the rich? Hang on tightly to that memory because it's now become the stuff of myth in Florida.

So how did we get into this mess? It seems there's nothing like an election cycle to bring out the foolishness politicians are prone to when they see a citizen near a ballot box. The legislators have been busy for years promising the voter-friendly but fiscally unrealistic tuition guarantees that trap our state universities in a beggared position while relentlessly devaluing the quality of the degrees we confer. And please understand: Not all degrees are equal. Not by a mile. They're only as good or as worthless as the ranking of the school they're from. Ask anyone who's ever sat on a law school or MBA admissions committee - they skim the cream from the competitive schools right off the top and shelve the rest without even cracking the files. As my mother is fond of saying, "You can go broke buying bargains." Unfortunately that's exactly what's happening with all the rate guarantees the Legislature has attached to Florida's Bright Futures and pre-paid tuition programs.

Obviously, we all want our public universities to be as affordable as is realistically possible - believe me, I feel you. I'm the single mother of a 6-year-old boy who'll want to go to college someday, and I, too, haven't received a cost of living increase to my paycheck in years, much less the merit pay I've earned - but "realistic" is the essential word here. Floridians aren't paying attention to the most basic quality of what they're buying when they holler to keep our tuition from increasing to something in the ballpark of the national average. It's just common sense to know that when you expect something for nothing, nothing is pretty much what you're going to get.

Oh, and what about that 5 percent tuition hike the state universities were finally promised a while back? If you read the artful fine print on that masterpiece of student exemptions, you'll find that once the grandfathering is done, the money it raises for the universities will compare to what you'd raise from a booster club bake sale. It does practically nothing to solve our public universities' immediate financial nightmare.

Thursday's Board of Governors decision to raise state tuition by 8 percent and let colleges slash enrollment and lay off staff shows only how deep the problem runs.

The final result of all this havoc is that Florida's public university professors are now looking to jump into any reasonable life boat that appears on the horizon - at FSU, practically every faculty member I know is either on the job market or preparing to be so soon. The tap is open wide and the Florida brain drain is on!

And most faculty won't have to look too hard for better jobs - other universities across the nation are already flocking to us, prepared to do some serious shopping. As the head of a hiring committee at North Carolina State said to me recently, "We're ready to pick the cherries off Florida State's tree." Once the faculty exodus is done, all our public universities will be left with is the lightning-blasted stump. At this moment, 75 percent of the classes in my department are already being taught by graduate assistants and adjunct instructors. Soon it'll be easier to spot a Himalayan snow leopard in Florida than that endangered species otherwise known as an actual professor.

But times are hard, you may say. Yes, and it's looking like they'll get a little harder before too long. With a national recession on its way, we must have the foresight to invest more, not less, money in Florida's public universities. Increasing funds for higher education has been the strong national trend over the last two years in practically every other state but Florida. As House Minority Leader Dan Gelber asked recently, how on Earth are we supposed to stimulate Florida's economy and attract significant, high-wage industries to our state while the whole country watches us gut even the most necessary funds for state higher education? Will they be impressed by how cut-rate our diplomas are?

The governor has said that he intends to "hold education harmless" as the ax keeps swinging, but not a single legislative soul has yet to describe what alchemy will produce the money to replace what has been and will be cut from Florida's higher education budget. At best it's fairy tale thinking to believe this money will somehow appear if the Legislature keeps wishing on a star. At worst it's a calculated maneuver to flim-flam Florida voters, hoping the hypnotic gratification of a tax cut will keep them from thinking through what's really in their children's and the state's best interests.

Having said that, I suppose there is one way the legislators could get me to vote for their fiscally irresponsible tax initiative.

I'll make a deal with Gov. Crist and the rest of the crew at the Capitol. If we can put another initiative on the ballot - one requiring every Florida politician, lobbyist, member of a Realtor's group and wealthy Florida landowner to guarantee that their kids, grandkids, nieces and nephews will all spend four years in our state university schools - then they can have my vote. Something tells me a lot of our educational budget horrors would be solved and very quickly if state higher education were an issue that truly affected these people's families and the opportunities for their children's future. I have no idea where I would find the desks for those kids, but I promise to try.

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