

Needed: A policy framework for public higher education in Ohio

BY LUIS M. PROENZA

Editor's Note: This is a guest editorial column by University of Akron President Dr. Luis M. Proenza responding to the proposed tuition cap by Gov. Taft.

"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."— Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University

For 30 years, Ohio has been steadily disinvesting in the very source that other states have recognized as the infrastructure for economic growth: higher education.

We now pay the price: Lower educational attainment has brought per-capita income to well below the national average. And failure to invest in areas of economic strength or opportunity has made Ohio a laggard in innovation and business start-ups derived from new technologies. Quite simply, our system of higher education has been severely weakened by 30 years of neglect.

None of Ohio's public universities are ranked as top-tier universities according to *U.S. News & World Report*, and only one — The University of Akron — has a science and engineering program ranked among the top five nationally.

Why? Because neither state appropriations nor tuition costs across our state universities reflects the excellence or opportunities of our universities.

As it is, the price structure among our universities reveals a large spread, or "tuition differential" — from \$4,402 per year at the lower end to \$6,916 at the upper end. That is the difference of \$2,514! And that translates into very large numbers, since for every 15,000 students, one institution collects \$52.7 million more than another.

It is not good public policy when even Ohio State University, our flagship institution, charges \$2,128 less than Miami, \$1,384 less than the University of Cincinnati and \$1,086 less than Kent State University.

Rather, it suggests that there is no logical or market-driven structure to the pricing of higher education in Ohio. Moreover, the previously existing 6 percent across-the-board tuition caps worked to exacerbate these already irrational differences — because 6 percent of a larger number is always greater than 6 percent of a smaller number.

Clearly, to again impose a cap, whether dollars or percentages, simply prolongs the agony and does nothing to resolve the problem.

What is needed, therefore, is a tuition and appropriations structure that signals an aggressive investment strategy — a policy framework that recognizes regional economic imperatives as well as objective measures of

institutional excellence and opportunities.

What might a strategic framework consist of?

California and Georgia are examples of many states that recognize at least three — and sometimes more — types of institutions of higher education, and fund and price them at levels appropriate to each right from the time of their establishment. California examines demographic and economic trends and establishes a new institution in each of three categories (doctoral and master's universities, and community colleges) whenever certain thresholds are exceeded, and the state then holds those institutions to national standards of excellence. Georgia recognizes and differentially funds community college, junior college, and four-year colleges and universities — enabling them to evolve as changing demographics may warrant.

Ohio, by contrast, recognizes only two types of institutions of higher education — community colleges and four-year universities — and allocates state appropriations based solely on the number and type of students enrolled at each. In other words, state funding to OSU is driven by the same formula that allocates dollars to any other institution of higher education. That, too, is not good public policy, since the

approach does not facilitate the development of specific programs that support state economic needs.

Nor does our state have clear expectations for excellence or for the support of its public universities. Ohio arguably has only one research university of national stature, OSU, and perhaps two, given Cincinnati's growth in recent years, with Akron and Ohio University the next closest contenders.

On the other hand, the University of California system boasts 10 research universities of national distinction strategically located across the state and will soon add another. That is one public research university for every 3 million people.

A comparable approach for Ohio, which is approaching 12 million in population, calls for the commitment and investment to enhance our leading universities — Akron, Cincinnati, OSU and OU.

Growing competitive pressures call for a new public policy agenda for our universities. Gov. Taft's exciting Third Frontier Project is the first part of that agenda. Let us rally behind his proposal, while also beginning to address the more fundamental funding and structural issues needed to reverse 30 years of missed opportunities.