



Sun News Column: March 10, 2011

Investing in Our Future *through contributions to scholarships*

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Guest Columnist

It's well known that low income students are less likely to enroll in college. And when our poorest students do overcome all the obstacles and enroll, they typically face additional burdens, such as more student debt or more hours spent working to pay the bills—in other words, more distractions. Not surprisingly, a student from the lowest income bracket is five times less likely to receive a bachelor's degree by age 24 than a student from the highest income bracket.

While our public colleges and universities here in Minnesota brace for cuts and hope for the best, it's important to remember that there are actually two higher education funding crises. One crisis is the result of the steady disinvestment in public higher education by the legislature over the last ten years or so. With more enrollments than ever, our Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system is currently funded at a level lower than we received in 2002. The scale and scope of the statewide crisis is daunting and the impact is far reaching.

The second funding crisis is deeply personal. Public colleges and universities in our state have made difficult cuts throughout the last decade, but the spending cuts and improved efficiencies have not been able to keep pace and tuition has also steadily cost students more and more. This time around, students are again lobbying for tuition restraint, but there seems little doubt that student finances are going to get harder, not easier. Along with state cuts, the House has recently proposed cutting Pell grant funding by 15 percent, or \$5.7 billion. This proposal would reduce the maximum Pell grant awarded to students by \$845. At North Hennepin, that would mean \$1,397,812 fewer dollars for students based on 2010 award numbers.

Those of us lucky enough to work on a college campus will consistently tell you that what keeps us energized is knowing that college is a transformational experience for so many students. We've seen it again and again, and, as a result, we are painfully aware that rising costs mean that talented and caring teachers, scientists, artists, or entrepreneurs may miss out on the opportunity to pursue their dreams. In a world where textbook costs alone can amount to \$1,000, costs matter. No question about it: two-year colleges remain the most affordable high quality option for students, but the affordability trend is nonetheless worrying.

One response to these two financial crises, along with contacting local legislators and

advocating for investments in public higher education, is to seek out alternate funding sources for students. At North Hennepin Community College, for example, we are developing a campaign to encourage students to apply for financial aid. On the one hand, NHCC awards more than \$34 million each year in the form of loans, grants, scholarships and workstudy opportunities to the 69% of our student body who apply for financial aid. On the other hand, a recent College Board study found that the neediest students are the least likely to complete applications for financial aid. We believe that if we can significantly increase the number of students receiving financial aid, we can help to offset increasing costs.

Like other two-year colleges in the metro area, North Hennepin is also aggressively stepping up efforts to raise scholarship funds for students. This year the North Hennepin Foundation aims to raise at least 15 percent more money for student scholarships over last year at the April 8 "Dream Upon a Star" dinner auction gala at the Earle Brown Heritage Center. Attendees have the chance to meet with community leaders from across the area, as well as the students their scholarship donations will support. The NHCC Foundation has given over \$2.5 million to students since 1995.

North Hennepin students have a compelling story to tell, and it may not be the story you expect. The average age of a NHCC student is 26. Nearly two-thirds of our students are first generation college students (neither parent is a college graduate), and 41 percent are low income. As traditional funding sources decline, it is our hope that the larger community will consider making a donation to help students reach their dreams and change their lives.

To support scholarships for students in need, you can create a scholarship (in your name or in the memory of a loved one), donate to an existing scholarship, or attend fundraising events like the NHCC dinner auction gala coming up on April 8, 2011. Visit www.nhcc.edu/events for more details.