



Georgia's University System Works to Improve Lives, Strengthen the State

Georgia benefits from a strong base of college-educated citizens. Such a base helps to attract investment in businesses that need a college-educated workforce and thus generates on average, higher salaries.

So, how is Georgia doing in terms of college education, in both numbers and cost? This is the question raised in a recent column by Mr. Richard Vedder, in which data suggest to him that Georgia's public colleges could serve more students more efficiently.

In terms of cost, while Mr. Vedder does not provide the statistical source for his assertion that "Georgia spends more per student on colleges than the national average," the most commonly accepted measure of college costs looks at both state appropriations and tuition. And by this measure, within the 16-member Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states, Georgia per student costs are the fourth lowest and well below the SREB average at both two- and four-year colleges.

Vedder's second assertion, "but [Georgia] gets a smaller proportion of its students to enter college," does not reflect the fact that the percentage of Georgia high school graduates going on to college is 68.2 percent, placing Georgia 10th nationally. Our major challenge, and one all of the state's educational agencies are tackling together, is to increase the high-school graduation rate, and thereby increase the pool of students who are prepared to attend college.

Despite Mr. Vedder's attempt to establish one, there is no connection between the amount of money spent on students who are in college and the pool of students available to enter college. One fact does not drive the other. And, in the University System, state appropriations are based upon actual college enrollment, not upon the size of the college-age population, or on students most likely to succeed.

With respect to the suggestions Mr. Vedder makes concerning tuition, two-year college enrollment, advanced placement, administrative costs, and consumer information, the University System already is moving ahead aggressively.

Tuition

The combination of regents' responsibility for setting tuition and strong state support means that Georgia's four-year college tuition in the SREB states is the lowest.

If the cost of Georgia 4-year public college tuition were like the cost of gas, we would be charging only \$1.50 a gallon compared to an average of \$2.15 in the SREB. This is the lowest price around. Georgia is also one of only two SREB states with two schools ranked in the US News and World Reports' top 20 public institutions; Virginia is the other. Virginia's cost, at \$2.87 a gallon, is even higher than the southeastern average. So, not only are we at the bottom in our costs, we're also selling premium!

And the regents set different rates not just between sectors of institutions, but also individually for institutions with special missions and a number of professional degree programs. But to set different tuition rates for specific classes could have, in addition to higher administrative costs, negative consequences. Students lacking financial resources for those classes or degree programs could be unintentionally excluded. The classes are expensive, but we do need more engineers.

Two-year College Enrollment

Projecting an additional 100,000 students by 2020 -- on top of the current 283,000 today -- we must create, and currently are building, capacity at two-year colleges.



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The premise that can be debated is Mr. Vedder's assertion that any student who is not retained to graduation in the System is somehow a misuse or waste of taxpayer dollars. The Board of Regents and its institutions are working hard to increase graduation rates, but we also believe that there is economic and social value to both the individual and society in college attendance, a premise with which Mr. Vedder does not appear to agree.

College Credit Courses

The University System is actively engaged with its partners in the Department of Education and the K-12 schools in a number of programs for academically advanced or gifted high-school students, including the International Baccalaureate, AP courses and Early College.

While these are important and appropriate programs for some students, they do not apply to all. Mr. Vedder faults the System for enrolling students who are academically unprepared for college, yet promotes opening up college-level courses to a much broader segment of the high-school population, who may, or may not be, prepared to succeed. We must be careful to provide programs appropriate to students that increase both Georgia's high school graduation and college success rates.

Outsourcing

Over the past decade, we have outsourced some functions. For example, we have entered into public-private ventures to build residence halls and related student-support facilities throughout the System, many on campuses that lacked dorms. This effort supports studies that show that undergraduate students who live on campus are retained and graduate at higher rates than those who live off campus. Our outsourcing policy in this area has the happy byproduct of helping improve student success rates. However, we cannot outsource instruction, research, and public service, our key missions.

Administrative Costs

The University System's primary assets are not equipment or the production of goods; our assets are people and the knowledge they create and impart. So with personnel making up 80 percent of our costs, we must be careful not to lose key assets we need to fulfill our mission of creating Georgia's next generation of leaders.

However, during a time of significant enrollment growth, there are fewer employees per student than in the past. We have reduced the total number of employees per 1,000 students from 182 in Fall 2000 to 149 in Fall 2007. So while enrollment was going up 31 percent over this period, administrative support dropped 18 percent. At almost every level of administration, there are fewer employees today serving more students – and that is a classic benchmark of good efficiency.

Our Shared Services project will create additional efficiencies from the consolidation of back-office operations such as payroll, purchasing, and accounts payable and receivable. This will allow us to redirect resources to our primary teaching, research and service missions on our campuses.

Transparency

Today students and parents can go online to <http://www.gacollege411.org>, a one-stop shop to learn about, plan and compare college costs in Georgia – both public and private.

University System reports and studies are available on topics such as retention and graduation rates, costs, tuition, and enrollment trends and statistics. Go to <http://www.info.usg.edu> for interactive reports and <http://www.usg.edu/research/> for a library of reports.



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The University System of Georgia welcomes transparency, input, collaboration, and partnership. This is the best means for identifying state needs and establishing clear goals, the best approach to meet these goals and to provide the resources needed to do so in an effective and efficient manner. We welcome Mr. Vedder's commentary because it helps generate discussion about Georgia's public higher education system.

The Board of Regents has been and remains both committed to and focused on increasing transparency and promoting efficiencies. But efficiencies cannot come at the expense of academic quality. The regents are charged with the responsibility of educating Georgia's next generation of leaders. This responsibility carries a high price tag to the state and society for failure. Therefore, academic quality over the long term must remain a priority -- to the System's current and future students and to the state.