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One that works

The June 1 opinion piece “The crisis of abused children” was a powerful article alerting readers to the horrors some children face in their own homes. As Dr. Seema Jilani pointed out, poverty is often the best predictor of child abuse.

Through my career as a pediatrician and professor of pediatrics and as a board member for Prevent Child Abuse N.C., I’ve also seen the tragedies and abuse correlated to families mired in poverty. Through a nationally recognized nurse home visitation program called Nurse-Family Partnership, in several counties, including Wake, we are beginning to mitigate the risk of abuse for children in poverty. NFP nurses provide first-time, low-income mothers with the education and tools to provide a healthy, nurturing environment that combats the circumstances that often trigger abuse.

I am encouraged by what I’ve seen from NFP. Through randomized, controlled trials, the program has delivered outstanding outcomes that include a 48 percent reduction in child abuse and neglect and a 67 percent reduction in behavioral and intellectual problems in children age 6.

We need programs like NFP that do not look the other way but work at the earliest stages to change this cycle of abuse.

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Ronald McDonald House Charities awards scholarships

The Daily Reflector
Tuesday, June 8, 2010

Two high school seniors and one local college student have been selected to receive scholarship awards from Ronald McDonald House Charities. Kaitlyn Anderson of D.H. Conley High School and Ami Gopal of Farmville Central High are among 200 students from across North and South Carolina who received college scholarships from the RMHC of North Carolina.

The $1,000 scholarships are based on leadership skills, academic achievement, community involvement and financial need. In addition, scholarship candidates submitted a personal essay describing how they intend to make a difference in society.

ECU student Christine Barker of Greenville was awarded the $1,000 Ray A. Kroc Youth Achievement Award Scholarship. These scholarships are for McDonald’s employees who are furthering their secondary education. These scholars were honored at an awards luncheon at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Cary.
Appointment

Diane Rodriguez, a member of AMEXCAN and a faculty member of East Carolina University, has been appointed by Gov. Beverly Perdue to the Governor's Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs.

Rodriguez was sworn in on May 19 in Raleigh.

"It is an honor to be appointed by Governor Perdue to serve on the Advisory Council on Latino Affairs," Rodriguez said. "I hope our work ensures that all Latino communities in North Carolina prosper from equitable treatment, including the constitutional guarantee that free public schools shall provide equal opportunities to all students."

The council has 15 voting members appointed by the governor and 14 ex-officio, nonvoting members: the chairman of the Employment Security Commission and the secretaries of the departments of Commerce, Health and Human Services, Crime Control and Public Safety, Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Correction, Transportation and Revenue.

As established by the executive orders issued by Gov. James B. Hunt in 1988 and Gov. Mike Easley in 2007, the advisory council's duties include advising the governor on issues relating to the Latino community; supporting state efforts toward the improvement of race and ethnic relations; providing a forum for the discussion of issues concerning the Latino community; and promoting cooperation and understanding between the Latino community, the general public, the state, federal and local governments.
Whether last year or last decade, state leaders have responded to financial crises without sacrificing one sacred budget cow — public university enrollment growth.

But the untouchable has just been touched. The state House has passed a budget that would cap enrollment growth at the 16 University of North Carolina campuses at 1 percent during the 2011-12 school year.

The decision is sure to start a fight with the state Senate, the longtime protector of the university system.

Maybe the fight was inevitable. Legislators can’t do anything to control enrollment increases in the public schools. School-age children in North Carolina have a constitutional right to a free, public school education.

With the economy in its current state, legislators also aren’t keen on keeping people from adding job skills at the state’s community colleges, where per-student costs are lower.

But legislators can cap university enrollment, keeping the number of students at UNC system schools at or near their current numbers. The savings can be pretty substantial. In the coming fiscal year, the state will spend nearly $60 million to allow the number of students enrolled to grow by about 3 percent.

University officials — including North Carolina’s near-saint of higher education, president emeritus Bill Friday — say the move is unprecedented and will have the effect of limiting access. They’re right.

But when UNC Board of Governors chair Hannah Gage says limiting access goes against everything the system stands for, she’s not exactly right.

There are different ways to limit access. Jacking up tuition at rates faster than inflation, as the system schools have done over the past 15 years, is one way. Measuring yourself against private schools like Harvard, Stanford and Vanderbilt is another. The effect is to curb the number of students who come from middle-class backgrounds.

The House’s means of curbing access would presumably cause schools to raise the academic cut-off for admissions. Students who didn’t make it in would do so because they didn’t measure up academically, not socio-economically.

Still, Friday is right. Curbing access to the universities by any means is hardly a good choice. The enrollment increases at the state’s public universities are essentially keeping pace with increases in the number of graduates coming out of North Carolina high schools. From 2003 to 2008, the annual number of high school graduates rose by 17.3 percent. During that same period, UNC system enrollment rose 17.8 percent.

From 2009 to 2018, the state Department of Public Instruction projects a 16-percent rise in the number of high school graduates. But if an enrollment cap is unprecedented, so are the state’s financial woes. House budget writers didn’t have many good choices.

And wouldn’t it be nice to see the folks over in Chapel Hill turn tuition into the same kind of sacred cow that enrollment increase money has become?

Native North Carolinians over the age of 40 can remember when that was actually the case.

Scott Mooneyham writes about North Carolina government and politics for the Capitol Press Association.
Colleges offer grants, work-study to reduce students' debt

By Daniel de Vise
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, June 6, 2010; G01

In a nod to the rising cost of college tuition and the burden of massive student loan debt on graduates, a growing number of universities are stepping up with "no-loan" aid pledges.

More than 50 colleges -- including elite private schools and flagship state universities in Virginia and Maryland -- have eliminated or capped loans in their financial aid portfolios for some or all students, promising enough aid in grants and work-study to cover most of the gap between what they charge and what each student can afford to pay.

At a handful of private universities with sizable endowments, including Princeton, Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, the goal is quite literally to eliminate loan debt for most graduating seniors.

"It's going down, and it's going down dramatically," said Amy Gutmann, president of Penn. "A typical family earning $90,000 a year attends Penn tuition-free. A typical family earning $40,000 a year attends Penn with tuition, room and board covered."

Although the pledges ease the crisis of paying for school, most require families to pay a portion, called the expected family contribution. It is a predictable sum that considers household income and assets. A family with an income of about $120,000 a year might be expected to contribute $30,000 a year toward college costs; a family with half that much might be asked to contribute $12,000.

"No loan doesn't mean no cost," said Lauren Asher, president of the nonprofit advocacy group Institute for College Access & Success.

Aid pledges help, but a college education remains a long-term investment. Parents either plan for the expense and sock away money, perhaps in a tax-advantaged 529 plan, or they leave the student to carry the debt burden into adult life. Many colleges with aid pledges still expect students to carry some loan debt, even if their families have saved for their schooling. It's a higher-education maxim that students with a financial stake in their education are more likely to complete it.

"I recommend a one-third rule, where one-third of projected costs will be paid from past income [savings], one-third from current income and financial aid and one-third from future income [loans]," said Mark Kantrowitz, a financial aid expert and publisher of the Web sites FinAid.org and Fastweb.com.

There is, in fact, variation in how colleges calculate a family's fair share of college expenses. Asher's group estimates a family with an annual income of $120,000 will be asked to contribute about $16,000 a year toward Harvard or Yale, $33,000 toward Amherst or Swarthmore and $39,000 toward Duke.
To some families, the "expected" annual tab comes as a surprise.

"The issue that I deal with most is that there is often a gap -- or chasm -- between what families believe is their need and what formulas proclaim," said Sally Rubenstone, a senior adviser at the college admissions Web site College Confidential.


The pledges were big investments at a time of rising endowments. Those funds got hammered in the recession. Two colleges, Williams and Dartmouth, scaled back their no-loan commitments this year. Other colleges have stuck with their pledges, despite the cost.

Penn's aid pledge, phased in over four years, pushed the university's financial aid budget to $149 million for the coming academic year, an increase of 78 percent in Gutmann's six-year tenure. But it's an investment, she said. "From our view, it maximizes our eminence as a university."

Strapped public universities are focusing their more limited largesse on students from low-income families, on the theory that middle-class families can afford some debt.

The wave of no-loan pledges hasn't halted the steady rise in student loan debt nationally. Kantrowitz estimated that the share of four-year students graduating with debt rose to 66 percent in 2008 from 46 percent in 1993, and that average debt rose in that span to $23,186 from $9,297, based on an analysis of federal data.

But at colleges making aid pledges, the investment is paying off.

At Princeton, the share of graduating seniors with loan debt declined to 21 percent last year from 33 percent in 2001, and average debt has dropped to $4,957 from $16,000.

At the College of William and Mary in Virginia, which eliminated loans for low-income state residents in 2006, the number of students from low-income families has increased by half in five years.

"We recognized that low-wealth students had been grossly underrepresented on our campus," said Earl Granger, associate provost for enrollment.

The goal of the no-loan movement is to reverse the upward trend in student debt, particularly among students least able to repay their loans, in an era of steadily rising college prices. The universities were also "looking for a competitive edge," Kantrowitz said. "They've had record applications in the last few years, in part because of this."

Word is spreading among high school juniors and seniors that expense is no longer a barrier to some of the nation's most selective private colleges, including many of the top liberal arts schools. And that is a factor to consider when weighing different schools.

For a middle-income student today, "it may be less expensive to go to Penn than to go to Berkeley," Gutmann said.

But the aid pledges vary widely, and opinions differ on who can rightly claim to meet full financial need.
Several dozen colleges have financial aid policies that meet the full demonstrated need of some or all students, including Georgetown, the University of Richmond and Washington and Lee University in the mid-Atlantic region, as well as the University of Maryland, the University of Virginia and William and Mary.  

Financial aid experts recognize a smaller group of about 50 colleges with aid pledges that minimize or eliminate loans in clearly worded pledges, such that a family can predict what the school will actually cost based on household earnings. Together, the schools serve about 8 percent of U.S. college students.  

Thus, the Institute for College Access & Success recognizes aid pledges from U-Md., U-Va. and William and Mary but not from Georgetown, whose guarantee to meet full need includes an unspecified level of public and private student loans.  

"We're highlighting these schools that have brought some transparencies to the process," Asher said.  

The University of Maryland, whose full annual in-state cost averages about $22,000 in tuition, fees and living expenses, pledges to meet that figure through grant aid and work-study for students at the poverty level. The university also promises full grant aid for seniors once they have accumulated $15,900 in need-based loans, minus any other aid they have received.  

Sarah Bauder, director of financial aid at U-Md., said she thinks the aid pledge is drawing more low-income students who might not have applied previously, "because they think they can't afford it." Bauder sends a letter to every high school principal in Maryland, every year, detailing the pledge.  

Federal data suggest the aid pledges yield at least one consistent result: modest levels of student debt. A review of 2008 figures, the latest available, for eight colleges that serve Washington area students found that no more than about half of students graduated in debt. Average debt ranged from $12,859 at William and Mary to $25,586 at the University of Michigan, little more than the cost of a single year's education for an in-state student.
A change of heart for college students

Study finds they show less empathy today than in '80s or '90s

By Stephanie Steinberg
USA TODAY

College students today show less empathy toward others compared with college students in decades before, a study from the University of Michigan says.

Sara Konrath, a researcher at the university's Institute for Social Research, looked at 72 studies that gauged empathy among 14,000 college students in the past 30 years. She found that empathy has been declining — especially since 2000.

The research finds that college students today show 40% less empathy vs. students in the 1980s and 1990s. The students are less likely to agree with statements such as "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me" and "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective."

The study did not evaluate why students are less empathetic, but Konrath says one reason may be that people are having fewer face-to-face interactions, communicating instead through social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

"Empathy is best activated when you can see another person's signal for help," Konrath says.

Michigan graduate student Edward O'Brien, who helped collect data for the study, says the "explosion" in social networking has caused college students to spend less time with each other.

"You might spend your night posting on Facebook walls and sending out tweets to hundreds of your online friends, but by doing so, you're also not spending time with real people and gaining valuable interpersonal experiences," O'Brien says.

Another cause may be changing expectations about success. Since the 1980s, there has been a steady trend in people feeling more stressed about trying to "get ahead," Konrath says.

"With so much time and effort devoted to yourself so you can succeed, who has time for others?" O'Brien says.

And this doesn't apply only to college students. With different demands at work — hours answering and writing e-mail — people have less time to care about others, Konrath says.

If people are less empathetic, she says, it has implications for America's aging population, because older people will increasingly rely on younger generations for support and care.

"Empathy is a very important moral trait in terms of everyday caring for people in our environment," she says.

Claire Raines, author of The Art of Connecting and an expert on generations, says such a study focusing on college students leads to stereotypes of the Millennial generation — people born between 1980 and 2000 — as more narcissistic and materialistic, which Raines says isn't necessarily true. She notes that the Millennial generation volunteers more than twice as often as Generation X, or people born roughly between 1960 and 1980. They also have better relationships with their parents, she says.

Raines says that empathy is declining in all generations and that people may be closing themselves off from others in response to the increase in the flow of information and bad news.

"If we just open our hearts to all the misfortune around us, it would be just overwhelming," she says.