

## Lt. Governor Simon: Keep college affordable

Written by Justin Stofferahn  
Monday, 15 October 2012 14:28

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*Education reformer calls for transparency, targeted state aid, middle class tax credit*

CHICAGO – October 11, 2012. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon visited University of Illinois at Chicago on Thursday to urge state, federal and higher education leaders to work together to keep college affordable so thousands of Illinois students can earn the credentials needed for good-paying jobs.

Governor Quinn's point person on education reform, Lt. Governor Simon presented a broad-based approach to tackle rising tuition costs and emphasized the importance of higher education, state and federal cooperation before she shadowed two students in a chemistry lab work-study program.

Simon supports College Choice Reports, a standardized report for all degree-granting institutions that would help students analyze real cost, debt and graduation rates across institutions. She is also serving on a state task force that could change the way need-based state grants are awarded to students as early as next school year.

The goal is to stabilize the cost for public universities and community colleges, following tuition and fee increases that have outpaced inflation, family incomes and available aid over the past 20 years. To pay the bills, students racked up an average of \$26,682 in student loans in 2010,

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up 14.3 percent from three years earlier and more than double what they owed in 1995, according to Pew Research Center report released last week.

“We’ve set a goal to have 60 percent of working-age adults hold college credentials by 2025. To reach our completion goal, we must make college more affordable. College cannot be accessible only to the privileged, when it is a prerequisite for a good-paying job here in Illinois,” Simon said.

Simon outlined three ways higher education, state and federal leaders could work together to keep college affordable:

- **Consumer protections:** Simon supports House Bill 5248, which would require all degree-granting institutions that operate in Illinois to publish online College Choice Reports. The reports would contain information such as net costs, average debt and completion rates in an easy-to-read and easy-to-find format. Unlike the federally proposed “shopping sheet” which provides cost information after a student applies to a school, the College Choice Report would be available to students online before they apply, to help them find a college or university that fits their needs and their budget.
- **Targeted assistance:** To better use state resources, Simon wants strengthen the Monetary Award Program and insure MAP grants promote college attendance and completion and reduce the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income students. MAP grants are currently awarded on a first-come, first-served basis to students based on financial need, but state funding reaches only about half of eligible students. A MAP Eligibility Task Force is evaluating ways to improve distributional equity and encourage timely degree completion.
- **Tax relief for middle class families:** Over 9 million students and families are taking advantage of the American Opportunity Tax Credit, saving them up to \$10,000 over four years of college. Simon supports making this federal tax credit permanent and preventing it from expiring at the end of this year.

“Cutting investments directly related to economic growth doesn’t make sense. We should work together on policies that prioritize education and employment, not shortchange Illinois students

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and quality employers,” Simon said.

**Eric Zarnikow, executive director of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, cited recent MAP award activity as evidence that affordability should be a key issue for Illinois leaders. For every eligible student who received a MAP grant this school year, another was denied due to lack of state funds.**

“MAP is one of the largest needs-based financial aid programs in the country. While approximately 150,000 students will receive an award this year, just as many will be left on the sidelines as a result of limited funding,” Zarnikow said.

“The higher education community looks forward to working with Lt. Governor Simon and state leaders to maintain and restore funding and support policies that will help more students graduate with a quality college education in a timely and cost-effective manner,” said George Reid, executive director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Simon said policy makers should keep students like UIC junior Mena Poonaki in mind as they address college affordability issues. Poonaki is a chemistry major who is paying for college through her work-study lab assistantship researching protein interactions in the brain. Simon worked alongside Poonaki and her classmates in UIC’s Science and Engineering building.

“Paying for college is my responsibility,” said Poonaki, who was born in Ohio but grew up in Iran and depends on work study and aid to cover costs. She moved to Chicago with extended family four years ago and selected UIC based on its strong science program. “Work study allows me not only to pay for school, but gain career experience and help me achieve my goals.”

Simon will visit each public university in Illinois for a College Affordability Summit this fall. Upcoming visits include Southern Illinois University in Carbondale on Monday, Oct. 15; Illinois State University and Western Illinois University on Thursday, Oct. 18; and Southern Illinois

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University in Edwardsville on Friday, Oct. 19.

“As a nation and a state, we need to make higher education affordability a higher priority,”  
Simon said.

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