

Simon to SIUE students: Affordability matters

Written by Justin Stofferahn
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Lt. Governor calls for reforms to stabilize college costs

EDWARDSVILLE – October 19, 2012. While speaking about college affordability today, Lt. Governor Sheila Simon said she vehemently disagrees with a nationwide survey sponsored and released this week by TIME Magazine and the Carnegie Foundation that shows 80 percent of adults believe higher education is not worth the cost.

Simon made her remarks while working alongside Southern Illinois University Edwardsville students in the dining hall. Her visit was part of a College Affordability Summit at SIUE Simon hosted to call on federal, state and higher education leaders to work together to make college more affordable for Illinois students.

"We cannot lose sight of our students who must work and borrow to bridge the gap between financial aid and rising college costs," Simon said. "To keep our state competitive in the national and global economy, we need more students to complete college than ever before. The only way we can achieve that goal is if college is affordable. We must work together to rein in costs."

Illinois ranks at the bottom of states when measuring the ability of low-income families to afford the net cost of an education at a public four-year institution in Illinois, and 46th in the net cost as a percent of income for middle-income families, according to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

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Data expected to be released by the College Board next week confirms that the cost of college has outpaced other goods and services for the past 30 years, even as family incomes have declined in the past decade. To pay the bills, students racked up an average of \$26,682 in student loans in 2010, up 14.3 percent from three years earlier and more than double what they owed in 1995, according to a Pew Research Center report released in early October.

Teagan Smith, a sophomore studying communications, is one of many students at SIU Edwardsville and across the state who is patching together work study and scholarships to pay for tuition and school expenses. The third of ten children, Smith said her family relies on financial aid so higher education is affordable for her and her siblings.

"I would not be in college if it weren't for work study and scholarships," Smith said. "Scholarships help me pay for tuition and work study covers other expenses, so together college can be affordable."

Simon is visiting all 12 public universities in Illinois this fall to hold College Affordability Summits with students and emphasize that higher education funding must be a higher priority for state, federal and school leaders. During her visit she outlined three ways stakeholders 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 to 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. Simon currently serves on a MAP Eligibility Task Force that is evaluating ways to improve distributional equity and encourage timely degree completion. A report to the General Assembly is due January 1, 2013.

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- **Tax credits for tuition payments:** More than 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 and quality employers,” Simon said. “Together we could 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.”

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.

SIU Edwardsville was the fifth of Simon’s affordability summits. She will visit the University of Illinois Springfield on Tuesday, October 23.

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