

Simon: Make affordable higher education a higher priority

Written by Annie Thompson
Friday, 16 November 2012 11:30

Lt. Governor calls for transparency, tax credit, targeted state aid DEKALB – November 16, 2012. After meeting with students at Northern Illinois University, Lt. Governor Sheila Simon called on federal, state and higher education officials to work together to keep college affordable so thousands of Illinois students can earn the credentials needed for good-paying jobs. According to a College Board trends report published last month, costs at public and private universities nationwide increased more than 4 percent this school year, while the cost of community college increased more than 5 percent since last school year. Compounding the burden on students, federal aid declined for the first time in three years.

“In order to retain and attract high-wage and high-skill jobs in Illinois, we will need 60 percent of our working-age population to hold a college credential by 2025,” Simon said. “We cannot expect students to complete college if they cannot afford college. I urge our state, federal and higher education leaders to work together to ensure college is not only accessible to the privileged, when it will be a prerequisite for a good job in our state.”

Simon is visiting all 12 public universities in Illinois this fall to hold College Affordability Summits with students, faculty and administrators. While at Northern, Simon shadowed Noemi Rodriguez, a federal work study recipient, at the Latino Resource Center.

“College affordability is an issue that needs to be addressed. I’ve seen students who were honor and AP students in high school have to drop out because they can’t afford college,” said Rodriguez. “I have work study, which helps make everything affordable, but it’s still a struggle. I had to work all summer so that I could make it through this semester.”

Rodriguez, a Dean’s List student majoring in nursing, established the Latino Honor Society on campus and, despite taking a full course load, remains very active in her community. Over the past two academic years, Rodriguez has volunteered over 300 hours with the Huskie Service Scholar Program, and has also interned at Children’s Memorial Hospital.

Following her affordability summit, Simon outlined three ways stakeholders can work together to make college affordable for students like Rodriguez:

- 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

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fits their needs and their budget.

- Targeted assistance: To better use state resources, Simon wants to strengthen the Monetary Award Program and ensure 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 that means 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 task force report to the General Assembly is due Jan. 1, 2013.

- 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.

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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