

Simon - Make affordable higher education a higher priority

Written by Kara Beach

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Colleges call for a vote on Choice Reports bill

CHICAGO – December 12, 2012. Calling for a vote on a key college affordability and transparency bill, Lt. Governor Sheila Simon marked her 12th and final College Affordability Summit today with a visit to Northeastern Illinois University.

Simon said that transparency is one of three basic tenets that will help students afford and complete college. She is backing legislation requiring all degree-granting institutions to publish an annual College Choice Report. The report would help students compare information, such as total costs and completion rates, across all degree-granting institutions in the state and make more informed decisions about where to spend their college dollars.

All 12 public university presidents and the Illinois Community College Board presidents' council submitted letters recently to the House calling for Senate Bill 5248 to be released for a vote before this session ends.

“College Choice Reports will be easy to access and easy to use, helping students find the facts they need to make an informed decision about an institution that will best fit their needs,” said Simon. “I appreciate the great support we have received for Senate Bill 5248, and I look forward to working with Speaker Madigan to bring this bill to the House floor for a vote.”

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While increased transparency will help students discover more information about the state's higher education institutions, Simon has outlined two additional ways stakeholders can work together to make college affordable:

- **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 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."

According to a College Board trends report published in October, 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."

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