

Editorial: Senate wants to fix state colleges, but they're not broken

LOCAL By The Palm Beach Post Editorial Board

0



Palm Beach State College will be one of 28 state colleges offering in-state tuition for Puerto Rican and Texas students. (Contributed)

Posted: 7:35 a.m. Sunday, January 07, 2018

At the end of last year's legislative session, Gov. Rick Scott sent a shock to Florida higher education by vetoing a bill aimed at boosting the universities' national esteem.

Scott wielded the ax because he thought the universities were being favored at the expense of the state's community college system.

Well, as it turned out, higher ed weathered that shock, and then some. The budget still included a \$232 million increase for the state's universities, allowing the University of Florida, for one, to plan on hiring 500 more faculty members. The nation is noticing. UF is up to ninth and Florida State is up to 33rd (a 10-spot leap in just two years) in U.S. News & World Report's ranking of top public universities.

With a new session starting on Tuesday, it's now time for the community colleges to get their due.

Whereas the last budget slashed community college funding by \$30 million, lawmakers should now make a priority of restoring that money — and then some. Scott reportedly will propose an additional \$30 million. That's as good a place to start as any.

Simple fairness demands it.

It's also important to quash a bill backed by Senate President Joe Negron, which in the name of focusing community colleges on their "core mission," will undoubtedly do them harm. It's opposed by the college presidents in our region — and statewide — with good reason. Florida's community college system already ranks among the very best in America. It hardly needs this dubious "improvement."

More than 800,000 students attend the state's 28 colleges — almost three times the number who go to the 12 public universities — to attain, at low cost, the credentials to begin careers in such vital fields as nursing, policing, firefighting and construction trades. Many are of limited economic means and diverse backgrounds. They're juggling jobs and family responsibilities.

The community colleges of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties serve more than 280,000 of those students. And according to those colleges' presidents, a key element in making the schools successful is their tradition of local control — their ability to heed the needs of the local business community and job market, and to nimbly offer courses and programs to meet those needs.

But in the sweeping Senate Bill 540, the colleges' local boards would have to share authority with a "State Board of Community Colleges." Try imagining this 13-member panel, appointed by the governor, having Southeast Florida's interests firmly in mind. You can't. It's a disturbing Tallahassee power grab such as we've seen in other areas such as land-use planning.

The bill's mistakes don't end there. It ties colleges' share of performance funding (\$60 million this academic year) partly to how well their graduates fare at the universities they later attend to get a baccalaureate degree. On what planet can this possibly be fair? How can you grade colleges on the performance of students after they've left for other campuses?

Just as impractical is another performance metric demanding that students complete their academic programs within "100 percent" of the ideal time frame. For an associate-degree program, that's two years. Trouble is, the typical community college student is a part-timer. The current metric, which recognizes reality, measures how students do within three or four years. Insisting on two years will cost the colleges money — for no good reason.

What's really driving this bill is a fear that community colleges are encroaching on universities' turf by offering too many four-year baccalaureate degrees. The bill would limit enrollment in four-year programs to 20 percent at individual schools, and to 10 percent system wide.

The Legislature first allowed community colleges to offer four-year degrees in 2001, and since then fears have risen that colleges would run wild with this freedom to expand. But they haven't, at least not in our region. Only 4 percent of students at Palm Beach State and Broward colleges are enrolled in four-year programs; just 7.5 percent at Miami Dade, the schools' presidents told the Post Editorial Board last week. A cap is unnecessary and, down the road, might prove to have damaging unforeseen consequences.

You don't need a college diploma to recognize the wisdom in the adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Our lawmakers should quit trying to "fix" a college system that's doing pretty darn well as it is.

Community colleges thrive on local control, so who needs a new state board?