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Choosing colleges

Amid the rancor at the Statehouse, an encouraging sign: Continued support for higher education

Eric Fingerhut described himself as "thrilled and grateful" that state lawmakers have set aside \$50 million for a university co-op and internship program. Ohioans should join the applause. The chancellor of the University System of Ohio correctly portrays the program as "a cornerstone of our strategic plan." Here is a tool for combating the affliction of "brain drain," young people exiting in waves for brighter prospects elsewhere.

Many Ohioans are familiar with the state ranking in the mid-thirties nationwide for the percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher. Less well-known perhaps is that Ohio beats the national average in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded. What explains the difference? The many graduates taking their degrees out of state.

The co-op and internship program isn't a cure-all. Ultimately, the state must create more jobs. The program will be helpful, linking students with companies in the state, students gaining workplace experience, companies gaining an advantage in recruiting and training. The concept is nothing new, roughly 60,000 students currently participating in co-ops or internships. The university system's strategic plan calls for involving 100,000 students by 2017, with the larger goal of adding significantly to the percentage of students who remain to work in the state.

As first conceived in the state's own stimulus package, the program would receive \$250 million in tobacco settlement money. That move triggered a lawsuit, the money eventually disappearing as the governor and lawmakers scrambled last year to repair a budget hole. Now the funding has been tied to the \$200 million in one-time licensing fees paid by casino developers. The catch is, the state first must form a Casino Control Commission, which then must craft the licensing rules.

All of this carries a heavy element of frustration, Ohio knowing what must be achieved yet lacking the necessary resources. At the same time, the reaction of Eric Fingerhut rings true: Ohio must set sound priorities, and do what it can. State lawmakers have some flexibility in directing the money from the casino licensing fees. They chose to route a key portion to the co-op and internship program.

That decision reflects a rare area of sustained consensus at the Statehouse, Republicans and Democrats grasping the importance of investing in higher education. They rightly see the university system as an economic engine and path to greater prosperity. Bill Harris, Jon Husted and others in the Republican ranks have prodded the governor. To his credit, Ted Strickland has advanced the cause substantially, tapping Fingerhut for the chancellor's job and tirelessly championing the connections between higher education, the next economy and new jobs.

At a time of sharp tongues and elbows around the state capitol, public colleges and universities have emerged mostly unscathed. It is encouraging to see signs that the enlightened thinking still prevails.

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