

A ruinous tuition hike

BY GENE NICHOL

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CHAPEL HILL -- We've witnessed headlines of late, many thought we'd never see. UNC-Chapel Hill students face a "proposed 40 percent tuition increase" - story upon story proclaims. Charles Kuralt likely spins in his campus grave. Here's hoping no one tells Dr. Graham.

Of course the move was not completely unforeseen. A legislature with no affinity for institutions of the public sector - even the nation's first public university - inflicted an astonishing 18 percent cut last summer. The wound was likely administered with a trace of delight. Chapel Hill has hardly proven to be the apex of Republican politics. And the other campus communities aren't much better. Sometimes budget cutting has its rewards.

Still, even if legislative leaders have goaded us into it, the Chapel Hill tuition move is a gargantuan mistake. Here's why.

First, it's obvious to state, we do not operate in a vacuum. North Carolina remains amid depression. Poverty has exploded. Underemployment creeps toward 20 percent. On every system campus, students leave, abandoning their futures, because the toxic combination of rising costs and diminishing aid means they can't pay the fare.

The timing of the tuition announcement is beyond brutal. Our chancellor's goal of generating "a sense of optimism among faculty employees about the direction of UNC" must seem stunningly out of touch to hundreds of thousands of Tar Heels, much like an electric utility seeking a big rate increase in tough times.

Second, there is, of course, the state constitution. We have apparently come to think that "as far as practicable ... free of expense" means "well positioned" in our "peer group" of flagship universities. But this is, surely, an odd interpretation.

Places like Michigan, Virginia, Minnesota, Berkeley and UCLA operate under no such constitutional constraint. They have abandoned a commitment to low tuition with barely a whimper. If Tar Heel families can't send their kids to Chapel Hill, it doesn't make much difference that things are worse in Ann Arbor. And "free of expense" doesn't usually mean "better than most."

Third, there is an unfortunate and inexorable structural corollary when public universities move to the "high tuition" model. I have seen it, first hand, in dealing with the legislatures of Virginia and Colorado.

When the state faces great budget exigency in North Carolina, our tradition has been to shield education, including higher education, from the harshest reductions. If the overall budget must be cut, for example, by 5 percent, historically, we've tried to hold education's curtailment to 2, or 3 or 4 percent. Some other departments,

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then, might expect a larger whack than 5.

In Colorado and Virginia, the presumption would typically be reversed. If a 5 percent recision is demanded, higher education budgets might expect 6, or 7, or 8 percent reductions, or more. The theory, unsurprisingly, was that universities could "make it up" by lifting tuition.

Student pocketbooks, then, become indirect (and sometimes relatively covert) state revenue sources - plugging deficits across an array of fronts. Before long, public university tuition rates begin to approach those of the privates. Access, especially middle-class access, gets crushed.

Finally, it is crucial, especially in times of exigency, to remember who we are. When UNC is described as "the university of the people" it is not some Madison Avenue slogan crafted for a commercial at halftime. Frank Graham promised a university built upon flames of learning that "would light the heavens of the commonwealth for the poorest youth." Carolina's commitment to affordability and access - married to extraordinary excellence - is singular and defining. And bold leaders, high and low, have pressed through the most trying circumstance to make Graham's dream a reality.

The people who work here believe, potently, in that mission. They believe it strongly enough to try to assure that a rogue legislature - one that scoffs at that ennobling vision - will not, through a handful of budget votes, demand that we abandon our calling. I think most of us would prefer to defer sabbaticals, yet again forgo raises, further cut travel allotments and enlarge our teaching loads, rather than start down the road to privatization. We have skin in this game.

The cure, finally, to a legislature that fails to understand this state's history and the decisive role that affordable, empowering, exquisite public higher education has played in it, is to change the legislature. It is not to abandon Carolina's defining sense of public obligation.

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