

## EDITORIALS

# Putting college out of reach

How much is too much? There, succinctly, is the question state Auditor Crit Luallen posed this week in a detailed, thoughtful audit of Kentucky's tuition and enrollment at universities and community colleges.

Her answer is not so simple. It suggests that what is now being charged is too much. It is too much because it is a barrier to people who want to go to college and should go if the state is to climb from the cellar when its percentage of college-educated adults is measured.

Access to an education beyond high school was fundamental to the sweeping higher education reform act championed successfully by former Gov. Paul Patton, for whom Luallen was a top aide. When he signed the act into law in May 1997, Patton had this to say: "I see a new Kentucky rising in the dawn of the 21st century — a Kentucky committed to progress, a Kentucky committed to change, a Kentucky committed to excellence."

Progress, change and excellence won't happen if people can't afford to send their kids to college.

The average cost of a year's tuition at a state university is now \$5,522. A decade ago, it wasn't half that. During a flurry of double-digit tuition hikes — 12.5 percent here, 13.7 percent there — the university establishment sometimes mocked the public outcry by pointing out that tuition in Kentucky was still a bargain since private schools charge so much more. Harvard costs about \$35,000 a year. Closer to home, Thomas More College is \$19,500.

But a comparison of private school to public school tuition

**The issue:**  
Tuition costs

**Our view:**  
Audit disturbing

is not the whole story. A state's public schools are on a mission to educate widely; private schools enjoy a narrower, more selective mission. If your mission is access, then your tuition should be affordable.

The average household income in Kentucky is \$49,000, \$13,500 under the national average. Knock from that taxes, the mortgage, the car payment, the groceries: Where's \$5,522 going to come from? And suppose more than one child is in college, which is how it usually happens — then what?

While financial aid is available, there is not enough of it. Gov. Ernie Fletcher made exactly that point in his State of the Commonwealth address last week, and suggested adding to the pot.

His addition, modest though it is, may go nowhere in a highly politicized House and Senate disinclined to support anything he proposes. But before the 2007 General Assembly blithely walks away, we suggest the members sit up and listen to Luallen's message: Kentucky has some ambitious goals to increase the percentage of college-educated residents. While universities are seeing higher enrollments, a higher proportion of the enrollees are from out-of-state. The in-state enrollment is stagnant at best. If we are to have a college-education population, that needs to change.

As Luallen's office said in releasing the audit: "This is happening at a time when the

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education asserts that between 2000 and 2020 Kentucky needs to add 389,000 new bachelor's degree holders to reach the national average. The council estimates that if Kentucky continues to perform at its current level the state will fall short of its 2020 goals by 211,000 bachelor's degree holders."

Fall short was not the promise of higher education reform, so what's gone wrong?

Some of the answer rests with structure. Higher education policy is made piecemeal, which divorces the tuition piece from the strategic piece. Politically, this has allowed opportunistic Frankfort politicians to claim they are holding the line on state expenses when what they've really done is pass the buck. Without adequate state funding, the universities turn to the next ready source of cash: tuition. In Frankfort, those who promised not to raise taxes can say they kept their word. It's a lie.

Luallen recommends a change that requires a tighter connection between education strategy and education cost. It will be a tough sell to persuade legislators to hold themselves accountable in this way.

Luallen is selling real medicine, not snake oil. This sort of substantive look at an important issue is exactly the sort of thing we hope is discussed this year as candidates run for governor. It is meaty stuff. Luallen, who passed on a run for governor in the Democratic primary, has contributed nonetheless to the debate.

Her audit should be on the agenda of anyone serious about higher education — and on the agenda of everyone serious about high office.