

## **Student Financial Aid: The Time is Now**

*Robert Duffett, President  
Dakota Wesleyan University*

In South Dakota, we have a growing problem and a great opportunity impacting our kids and our economy. According *The Institute for College Access*, a nonprofit organization committed to available and affordable higher education, South Dakota college graduates lead the nation in student loan debt.

Who cares? The student acquired the loan; he or she is responsible to pay it off, right?

In a very practical way, our state has an important stake in increasing the number of our college graduates and it should not be over looked. Simply put, to grow our economy we need *more not fewer* college graduates. Herein is the problem. High student loan debt makes salary the highest priority for a recent grad, rather than simply one of several criteria. Many newly minted college graduates would prefer to stay in South Dakota – even at less pay. Yet, a higher salary in another state is difficult to refuse. Once a college grad leaves, our state loses their talent and taxes. Many will not return.

If college indebtedness is only a personal issue and not partly addressed as a public policy issue; then other states with higher salaries will benefit from our higher educational system.

Here is where the governor and legislature can help. There are two simple ways, at moderate cost, to lessen student debt and increase the likelihood our college grads will stay, enhance our economy and become contributing citizens.

First, the South Dakota Legislature needs to increase funding for L.E.A.P. (Leveraging Educational Assistance Program) and G.A.P. (Grants for Access and Persistence) grant programs. L.E.A.P. and G.A.P. are state/federal college scholarship programs for the most financially needy students already admitted to SDSU, Dakota Wesleyan and every other public, private, technical and tribal college in our state. The federal government will match dollar for dollar, based on an allocated amount, what the state invests. Every penny goes directly to qualified students.

For the last two years the South Dakota Education Access Foundation in Aberdeen funded L.E.A.P. and other grants to low income students at most colleges in South Dakota. And, G.A.P. grants will become available during the next fiscal year.

What if, during this session, our legislature matched this foundation and appropriated the total amount needed to acquire the maximum federal allocation for both L.E.A.P. and G.A.P. programs *and* also invested in a state need-based scholarship program for low income families with students who seek a college degree?

Second, increase the Opportunity Scholarship in 2011 to \$6,000 from the present level of \$5,000. Governor Janklow suggested \$6,000 in 2001. The Opportunity Scholarship is a merit-based program for South Dakota's most academically accomplished high school graduates who attend a South Dakota college. Since its inception in 2004, more than 7,000 students have benefitted. By any measure, it is extraordinarily successful.

If the Legislature chooses to fund this \$1,000 increase it would cost taxpayers a million dollars over a four-year period. This additional investment in our student aid programs will make a significant impact in lessening student debt, encourage students to complete their degree and provide South Dakota with more highly educated workers for our knowledge-based economy.

Should our Legislature wait for better economic times? I think not. For those who urge caution on educational investment, history offers a different lesson. The fountainhead of all student aid programs in America, the GI Bill of Rights, was signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt on June 22, 1944, two weeks after the D-Day

invasion. The outcome of the war was uncertain, western civilization was in the balance and our federal treasury was depleted. Student aid from the GI Bill was so generous that millions of WWII veterans literally received a free college education courtesy of Uncle Sam.

Due in part to the visionary leadership of our own South Dakota Republican Senator Chan Gurney from Yankton, who cosponsored the GI Bill in the Senate, it unanimously passed in both the House and Senate.

It took vision and courage for legislative leaders like Sen. Gurney to plan for the future, affirm college education as a public good and lead beyond the difficulties of the moment. I encourage Governor -elect Dugaard and both houses of our Legislature to follow his example. South Dakota can fund these programs, lessen student debt, keep our students home and thus better build our economy.