



# VIEWPOINT

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state would be better off with a wholesale re-evaluation of how higher education is delivered in the Buckeye State. Don't look for state education officials to be championing this cause any time soon, though.

Ohio taxpayers provide almost \$3 billion to higher education in Ohio. While the higher education budget has been affected by Governor Strickland's order to trim spending because of the state deficit, it has taken a far lighter hit than many agencies. Governor Strickland and other politicians know that higher education is popular among voters. Many Ohioans attended universities within the state and have a strong sense of school pride. There is also the belief that higher education spending is an investment -- one that pays off in greater economic growth for the state.

Higher education certainly benefits most students. Those who obtain degrees, on average, make higher wages. There are also benefits from research and other endeavors undertaken at universities and colleges throughout the state. But is the current system the best way to continue providing higher education? Would Ohio students be better served by a fundamental reform of the higher education system?

Last year the Chancellor of the Board of Regents, Eric Fingerhut, released a strategic plan that proposed some minor reforms in the system and called for increased funding. While researching a recently-completed study on this plan with Dr. Richard Vedder, we found some items in the plan which are commendable and should speedily be implemented. However, our main finding was that the overall focus of the plan suffers from a desire to continue doing the

## What Direction for Higher Education in Ohio?

By Marc Kilmer

While other state programs are facing the budget knife, higher education in Ohio is largely being spared. In fact, the Board of Regents is pushing a plan that would expand its funding over the next decade. State taxpayers and students would benefit from a closer scrutiny how the higher education system uses its current funding, however. In fact, the

same old thing. The only real difference is that the plan proposes to do it on an even larger scale.

For instance, the plan calls for 27,000 more Ohioans to graduate from Ohio's public higher education institutions by 2017. That is an almost 39% increase over today's rate of graduation. This growth is unrealistic, given Ohio's demographics and the fact that for many, a college degree is not a good investment. While policymakers may not like to acknowledge it, for some Ohioans there is not an economic benefit from graduating from college. These economic realities are absent from the Board of Regents' report.

The refusal to acknowledge Ohio's demographic trends is especially notable in the proposal to open a community college in the Mahoning Valley. With a declining population and fewer than average younger Ohioans, the rationale for such a college does not seem strong. When you couple these demographic realities with the fact that the area is served by private education institutions offering programs similar to those at community colleges, this idea seems like a certain waste of scarce taxpayer resources.

The main weakness of traditional thinking on higher education comes from a desire to fund institutions, not students. Instead of focusing on new programs and new buildings, the Board of Regents should focus on students. Instead of empowering education bureaucrats, the Board of Regents should empower students. By giving students control of their funding, higher education in Ohio will evolve to serve the needs of those who are using it, not those in the state government.

This type of thinking is an anathema to most in the higher education bureaucracy and the General Assembly. After all, it would deprive them of a large measure of their control over higher education in the state. If Ohio wants to invigorate its higher education system, though, this type of bold thinking is desperately needed.