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Tramm : Az's choice: Fund schools, or prisons

JENNIFER TRAMM
Tucson Citizen

Something insidious is happening to higher education in Arizona.

Inadequate funding by our Legislature is hampering the University of Arizona's ability to hire and keep faculty and staff.

Neglecting to fund education, from kindergarten to college, affects more than the students.

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Crime rates are higher in poorly educated populations. Indigent health care costs rise. Both outcomes affect everyone.

The point of having a university is to teach those who wish to learn. But if those who would teach and those who would support them are fewer and unhappy, then the university and its students will suffer.

Building repairs will slow down. Instructors will be stretched so thin that student learning could be compromised. Faculty will leave.

The UA has 42 fewer staff and faculty members funded by the state than it had in August, according

to a Feb. 22 report in the Arizona Daily Wildcat.

University President Robert Shelton said in a Feb. 21 statement that the university will limit hiring to positions that are "most critical to the operations of the university" for the rest of the fiscal year, which ends June 30.

Shelton told me that the UA's state payroll is \$5 million less than it was in October and, while fiscal 2009 has not yet been decided, he said, "We're bracing ourselves for a cut."

He added that, while the UA faculty are very loyal, "I worry in the long run, if we don't have competitive salaries, we're going to lose top people, whether they're top researchers or top teachers or both."

The UA Faculty Retention/ Loss Report 2007 shows that faculty are being recruited away with salary offers averaging 34 percent higher than the salaries they were paid at UA.

Institutions that lured away our talented faculty range from Brown, Harvard and Duke universities to state universities in California, Pennsylvania, Texas and elsewhere.

Some faculty left for higher salaries at corporations, such as Intuit, which makes software.

A significant number of UA employees - 39 percent of appointed professional staff and 34.4 percent of classified staff - were unsatisfied with their pay, said a report last spring by the UA Millennium Project Action Committee.

The big question is how much Arizona and taxpayers value higher education.

In the decade since 1998, the Legislature has increased funding of universities by 45 percent and of community colleges by 42 percent - even as it raised funding for the Department of Corrections by 103 percent.

The Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System's funding increased by 164 percent.

That's backwards. Many people wouldn't need AHCCCS if they had a better education, which would get them better jobs, hopefully with benefits.

But the Legislature does not seem to value education.

Arizona ranked 49th in the nation in K-12 per-student spending in 2006, the U.S. Census reported this month. The national average was \$9,138 per student. Arizona spent \$6,472 per student.

PHOTOS & IMAGES

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University of Arizona President Robert Shelton says that, while the UA faculty are very loyal, "I worry in the long run, if we don't have competitive salaries, we're going to lose top people, whether they're top researchers or top teachers or both."

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A well-educated populace is a law-abiding populace, statistics show.

States with higher college enrollment rates also have lower violent crime rates, says an Aug. 30 report by the Justice Policy Institute.

Rhode Island had the highest college enrollment rate in 2004, and its violent crime rate was 247.4 per 100,000 people, far below the national average of 465.5 per 100,000.

North Dakota, second in college enrollment, had even better numbers, with a violent crime rate of 79.4.

Arizona's violent crime rate for 2004 was 504.4 per 100,000 people - 8 percent above the national average. That rate increased to 513.2 per 100,000 in 2005.

Arizona needs to get on the bandwagon and educate its people. That costs money. So do law enforcement and prisons.

The big decision is whether the money goes to educate or to imprison.

Jennifer Tramm, a mother of two, is a journalism major at the University of Arizona.

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1. *Comment by Woody C. (colemanok) — April 12, 2008 @ 10:21PM*

The education system should be the #1 priority of any public office.

2. *Comment by robert h. (hbrand) — April 14, 2008 @ 2:57PM*

agreed!! start funding schools decently!

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