

Tech schools are worthy of private dollars

Editorial

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The funding dilemmas that have bedeviled the 35 schools comprising the University System of Georgia for some time now - growing enrollment, rising costs, declining state support and an aversion to tuition and fee hikes - are now at the doorsteps of the state's technical colleges, according to a Sunday report in this newspaper (Story, "State stingy, tech schools go begging").

Athens Technical College has taken a number of proactive steps in connection with these funding concerns, including the hiring some time ago of a director of institutional advancement. The job entails finding private funding sources to supplement state outlays, tuition, and the array of private donations and corporate in-kind contributions already coming to the school - such as internships, the loaning of expert employees to teach classes, and providing students with access to equipment the school itself does not have.

Ron Jackson, commissioner of the state Department of Technical and Adult Education, recognizes that a multifaceted approach is needed to address the funding issues at the state's technical colleges. In Sunday's report, Jackson said that, with regard to state funding, he wants the state legislature to allow his department to keep unspent state outlays from one fiscal year into the next as a means of making more state dollars available to technical colleges. He also has proposed that the state funding formula be modified so that a core set of employee positions will be funded, and so that it reflects the actual cost of offering a given academic program.

To his credit, though, Jackson isn't expecting the state to foot the entire bill for rising costs. He told the newspaper he's prepared to include a tuition increase in the mix when he presents his budget to state officials next year.

Jackson also wants the state's technical colleges to begin fundraising campaigns, or expand existing fundraising initiatives, to help ensure they will have adequate resources.

That's certainly going to be a challenge for those schools. For Athens Tech, it will mean looking beyond its current donor base - typically, its private dollars come from college personnel and members of the Athens Tech Foundation, the two-decade-old nonprofit organization that provides financial support to the school.

But, if the pursuit of additional private funding is a challenge for the institution, it is no less a challenge to the community.

With nearly three dozens of programs in a variety of business, technical and other fields, Athens Tech is an integral part of this area's economy, providing trained workers to any number of businesses, to say nothing of fostering the kind of practical entrepreneurship that creates jobs for the area.

In that light, it's clear that the donor base for the school should expand, to include all of the businesses and industries who have hired or will hire Athens Tech graduates. Those individuals who have used the training they received at Athens Tech to go into business for themselves also should be among those who are willing to write checks to the school.

And, because Athens Tech is undoubtedly part of the answer to the OneAthens initiative to decrease the poverty rate in Athens-Clarke County, all who call this community their home should consider making a donation to help ensure that the school can continue to offer the kind of up-to-date training that will prepare students for the jobs available here.

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