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Don't cut funds for independent colleges. Their graduates make Florida stronger | Opinion

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Independent colleges and universities, including St. Thomas in Miami Gardens, face cuts to a state grant for students.

In the past three weeks, more than 6,000 Floridians have generated over 280,000 emails to Florida legislators in support of EASE, a state grant that allows higher-education students to choose the college or university that they think best aligns with their personal values and academic learning needs.

During the past three years, we have seen continued attacks by the Florida Legislature to curtail the grant, a trend that saw the grant decreased from \$3,500 to \$2,841 two years ago. This year, House budget bill HB 5601 and House Bill 1261 contain language that would disqualify 12 institutions — and more than 13,000 students — from receiving the grant. The 12 schools that would be impacted are part of ICUF — Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida — and include St. Thomas University, of which I have been president for three years.

The arbitrary metrics that the House chose to disqualify the 12 schools are not a true representation of the quality education offered by ICUF institutions. In fact, in 2020, St. Thomas was ranked No. 1 in the Southeast in social mobility by U.S. News & World Report, affirming our success in accepting low-income students and in 10 years catapulting them into a higher financial level. Furthermore, among all Florida 2018-2019 graduates employed full-time, St. Thomas has the highest average wage of all ICUF institutions (\$69,000) — higher than the average of the Florida college system and state university system.

Many of the students that would be affected have chosen private institutions that have shown consistent and conclusive return on investment for Florida taxpayers. In the last fiscal year of funding for higher education in Florida, only 5 percent of went to ICUF schools, those schools produced 27 percent of all degrees. For every \$1 million spent on Florida higher education, ICUF schools produce 305 bachelor's degrees, versus only 41 bachelor's degrees by state schools. ICUF schools throughout the state have become the true access schools for thousands of underserved and financially vulnerable students.

Clearly, St. Thomas and other ICUF schools create massive return on investment for its students and taxpayers. We support state funding of higher education at public institutions and for Floridians who choose private schools because all statistics show that the best investment anyone can make in their lives, regardless of what media and politicians say, is earning a bachelor's degree. It changes the financial trajectory of the student and their families generations to come, which is good for Florida.

The state Senate understands this, and its Education Appropriations Committee seeks to reinstate the per-student EASE award from \$2,841 to \$3,500 with no weaponized, flawed metrics included in their proposal. At St. Thomas, the EASE grant is an extremely significant dollar amount for students, 67 percent of whom are eligible for federal Pell aid and hail from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Without EASE, these students will not select a private, faith-based institutions because they simply cannot afford it. Students not only lose the EASE grant, they also lose their right to choose a private institution, such as St. Thomas, which has been contributing to the prosperity of South Florida and the country for 60 years. The students deprived of the choice to attend St. Thomas and other ICUF schools might then go to a school that is not a fit and drop out, go out of state, or worse: attend no school at all.

We must continue to communicate to tell the Florida Legislature that choice in higher education is a necessary, and ultimately beneficial, tool. Before serving at St. Thomas, I experienced politicians' budget cuts of choice grants in Pennsylvania and Ohio —with disastrous results. I watched young minds wasted, college degrees abandoned, a brain-drain out of state and school closures.

In Florida, it is up to all of us to uphold the value of choice, as we do with school vouchers for K-12 schools. Eliminating EASE funding ignores more than 40 years of proven return on investment, impedes social mobility, and limits higher education access by Florida students clamoring for institutions that meet their personal needs. We stand with the Senate plan and encourage the Budget Conference Committee to follow the Senate's lead.

Support EASE here at www.advocacyicuf.org. We can save EASE for 13,000 immediately affected students — and untold thousands in years to come.

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