UWSP helps keep college affordable for students

Stevens Point Journal | October 24, 2014

College affordability is in the news almost daily. We recently received facts and figures from the UW System budget office for fiscal 2012, which may be of interest to state residents.

- The cost of educating a student in the UW System is on track with the rate of inflation. If we focus exclusively on instructional costs, they are funded through two revenues sources: Tax revenue (known as state general purpose revenue, or GPR) and tuition. In addition, students pay for housing, dining and other costs of going to college.
- State support for educational costs has declined, especially in recent years. It has not kept pace with cost of education per student.
- Students' share of education costs has increased as state funding declined. The portion of costs covered by tuition per student rose faster than the inflation rate, with the biggest increases since 2002.
- Average unmet need, as determined by the U.S. Department of Education, after grants and scholarships was $10,438 per student. This need is usually met by student borrowing.
- In 2012-13, 73 percent of Wisconsin residents receiving bachelor's degrees had outstanding loan debt. Loan debt averaged $29,219 statewide and was $29,291 among UWSP students, according to our financial aid office.

Both UW System and UWSP are committed to funding need-based financial aid to help ensure college is affordable. UW System is seeking a significant increase in Wisconsin Grant funding (formerly WHEG) to eliminate a waiting list for this aid.

UWSP awarded $4 million in Wisconsin Grants-UW Schools to students in 2013-14, part of the nearly $80 million in financial aid awarded. This includes federal and state loans, grants, scholarships and private aid. The UWSP Foundation awarded $813,000 in scholarships.

UWSP successfully applied to receive up to $425,000 in the next five years in grant assistance for low-income students in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. We received $81,000 for the 2014-15 academic year to provide 81 students with additional financial aid of $500 grants each semester for up to five years. The funds were awarded as part of a Wisconsin HOPE Lab study on whether the extra need-based aid helps students obtain degrees in STEM fields.

Our financial aid staff helps students navigate various financial aid options, including grants, loans and student employment. We prepare students for life after graduation, for jobs that enable them to pay back student loans.
That may be why the loan default rate of UWSP students is 4.1 percent (based on borrowers who entered repayment within the last three years). We are well below the statewide student loan default rate of 6.9 percent and the national rate of 14.7 percent.

UWSP helps with college affordability in other ways:

- A text rental program for most required textbooks costs students $90, compared to an estimated $600 students at other colleges spend each year on textbooks.
- Our self-operated Dining and Summer Conferences employs 435 students part time. These are good jobs with flexible hours that provide financial resources to students.
- Revised general education requirements give students more flexibility to complete their degrees, often in less time. More students are able to graduate in four or 4.5 years. They can begin pursuing career goals sooner, accumulating less student debt.

All UW campuses have a tuition freeze in the current biennium, which helps affordability.

Most people do not realize that state taxpayer support covers only 17 percent of UWSP's total budget.

For the state of Wisconsin to advance economically and socially, we must maintain a high-quality public university system. We need to develop a sustainable college affordability model to ensure students succeed and quality education continues.

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