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State tuition grant is good investment

By **BELINDA KEISER**
FLORIDA VOICE

Members of state Senate and House committees are making a well-placed effort to maintain the Access to Better Learning and Education tuition grant program for 2007-08, currently assisting the career-focused, adult students.

The ABLE program was passed by the Legislature in 2003 to assist Florida residents seeking bachelor degrees at one of 12 accredited, independent postsecondary institutions in Florida. The 12 colleges and universities are private, for-profit or private, not-for-profit institutions.

The committees, Senate Higher Education Appropriations and House Schools and Learning Council, have suggested a cut to ABLE in the current year of \$287,000. That would leave ABLE funding at \$4.1 million if the proposal passes through the Legislature during the coming session. While it is unfortunate that any student financial assistance programs must be cut, the committee showed great insight into value of the ABLE grants.

Most ABLE recipients are adult, career-focused learners who are eligible for no other state financial assistance. They typically work full or part time and have families; thus they need the flexible schedule, individual attention and career-focus provided by the 12 schools. A large percentage of the students are the first ones in their families to attend college.

Tremendous challenges face higher education and current economic conditions require the state budget to be reduced. However, ABLE is a valuable, cost-effective program that should be maintained at the highest level possible. The individual grants are modest but crucial to students paying their way through college with little financial aid. Students at private institutions deserve full access to postsecondary educations and should have the right to choose a college or university that best fulfills their individual needs.

Florida is well behind other states in producing baccalaureate degree graduates. And now public universities are capping enrollments and predicting budget shortfalls in the hundreds of millions of dollars. One recent study forecast 60,000 potential students being turned away by the state university system by 2012.

Financial needs are the number one barrier to higher education. The ABLE grant program broadens access to higher education without a capital investment by the state of Florida. Almost 300,000 students in Florida presently attend private postsecondary schools at little or no cost to the state's taxpayers. State tuition grants go directly to the students to spend at the school of their choice; private schools are not subsidized with state funding.

Students in these schools are prepared for careers in critical workforce shortage fields in Florida such as biotechnology, nursing, allied healthcare, elementary education, business, criminal justice, computer technology, computer animation and graphic design and culinary arts. Graduates typically stay in Florida after finishing and contribute to the state's workforce and economy.

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