

Increase Pell grants, but 1 year at a time

by *The Detroit News*

Of all the billions of dollars in government giveaways proposed in President Barack Obama's first budget, the money targeted to increase college aid is perhaps the most justified.

America needs more college graduates if it hopes to compete in the 21st-century knowledge economy. But tuition costs are soaring as colleges pass on the cost of rising expenses and declining state aid to students and their families. That's particularly true in Michigan, where tuition at most public colleges and universities doubled during the past decade. A recent Your Child Michigan survey found cost to be the major barrier to college attendance.

Raising Pell grant limits to \$5,350 a year should lower that barrier somewhat for needy families.

Unfortunately, there's a catch to Obama's proposal that makes it unpalatable in its current form. The president wants to raise this year's grant "again, a good idea" and then make sure it goes up every year automatically without action from Congress.

He proposes to index the grant to inflation plus 1 percent, turning college aid into yet another entitlement program that the federal government has to fund and increase every year, similar to Medicaid and Medicare.

It is rarely good policy to remove spending decisions from the legislative body. It may be that increasing Pell grants every year is a sound policy; if so, Congress should feel compelled to do so with an annual vote.

But lawmakers should also have the flexibility to decide whether an increase in Pell grants should have a higher or lower claim on taxpayer dollars than other needs in any given year.

Locking in the funding excuses Congress from debating spending priorities and makes it more difficult to balance a budget.

It also perpetuates programs and policies that could become outdated. Future presidents and Congresses may decide there are better options for delivering college aid than Pell grants. Obama shouldn't try to set his agenda in stone with funding guarantees.

Congress should increase college aid, but not this way. It should strip the guaranteed funding increases out of the budget and preserve the appropriating power given to it by the Constitution.

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