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As change looms in higher ed, state needs plan

Pioneer Press Editorial

According to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, over the next decade, the number of high school graduates nationally will climb while the number of Minnesota graduates will drop by 10 percent. And, in that time, 11 percent fewer students will graduate from Minnesota colleges.

The economic, social and competitive implications of these trends are staggering. As our workforce ages, business will have to turn outside the state and country to meet its demand for college-educated workers. One estimate says such jobs, by 2017, will outnumber qualified candidates by 13,000 per year.

Administrators and legislators perpetually talk about and tinker with the machinery of education, and the political and parental winds direct much of that attention to K-12. Minnesota's colleges, however, are looking deeper into the socio-economics of education and planning for a decline in the number of high school graduates and a change in the demographic mix. The Minnesota Private College Council, representing 17 schools, has laid out a broad plan to knock down the academic, psychological and financial barriers keeping many kids from attending and succeeding in college.

Whether this plan hits the right notes or not is almost beside the point. The point is this: Big change is coming, and we'd better get ready.

A prominent factor contributing to these numbers is Minnesota's changing ethnic and racial makeup. According to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, between 2004 and 2014, Minnesota will see a 40 percent increase in nonwhite high schoolers. At the same time, largely due to a decline in the birthrate, white enrollment in Minnesota high schools will drop 19 percent.

The percentage of whites and Asians earning undergraduate degrees is four times greater than the percentage of black, American Indian and Hispanic students earning degrees. Among high-ability students of all races and ethnicities, less than a third of those coming from low-income families earn a college degree. At the same time, the average state grant for college-bound students has fallen 14 percent (adjusted for inflation) over the last five years.

Here's how the Minnesota Private College Council proposes tackling the problem: Expand programs that have proven successful in preparing low-income students for college and, for these students, create a scholarship that connects the funding to rigorous coursework. The proposal also asks legislators to increase funding for the state grant program — by \$191 million statewide — and open it to adult part-time students. Also part of the mix is a campaign to give students and their families more information about

the benefits of a college education and help overcome the historical and cultural hurdles that often stand in the way.

The proposals call for state legislators to come up with \$320 million — exactly how would be up to the Legislature — on top of the roughly \$240 million the state already doles out in grants for college-bound high schoolers. It's a challenging request for a state just beginning to poke its head out from the hole of budget shortfalls.

The Minnesota Private College Council wants people to see this not as mere education funding, but as an investment in Minnesota's future. Without passing judgment on the details of the plan, we agree. Minnesota businesses have strong histories, practices and motivation for building and growing around Minnesota talent. But if the skilled mathematicians and scientists aren't here, they'll go elsewhere.

It's hard to say yet how the potential of this investment stacks up against others facing the new Legislature. But access to higher education is a core principle here. Minnesota's ethnic and racial landscape is evolving, and so must the dynamic of our conversations.