

Grand Forks Herald

Lloyd Omdahl: Free college would be cheaper than welfare

By Lloyd Omdahl

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Eyebrows were raised in political and education circles last year when Republican Gov. Bill Haslam of Tennessee announced that his state was going to provide students with free community college.

Unfortunately, President Barack Obama said it was a great idea. That automatically activated a chorus of critics who would have endorsed the idea had the president not spoken.

But the idea still is worth considering.

Regardless of where the idea comes from, providing free higher education makes more economic sense than carrying the staggering load of public dependents generations into the future.

In the past 50 years, the public cost of supporting the undereducated and underemployed with a plethora of federal and state poverty programs has escalated. The rapidly-changing job requirements indicate that, unless we change directions, the situation is going to get worse.

Taxpayers are now underwriting scores of programs designed to help people who haven't been able to provide for themselves. One researcher in the conservative Cato Institute estimated that there are 126 programs for low-income individuals and families.

Food stamps now go to 46 million family units nationally. (In North Dakota, that amounts to 27,000 family units costing \$7 million a month.) Forty-two percent of these folks are working in marginal jobs.

Taxpayers are financing school lunches, rent payments, housing assistance, child care, tax credits, Head Start, special WIC for food, Children's Health Insurance, Medicaid, nursing homes, insurance subsidies, fuel assistance and more — much more.

Since the federal government pays the lion's share of these costs, many citizens have the idea that it is all free. It may surprise some to know that the federal dollar has the same value as the North Dakota dollar, the local government dollar or the billfold dollar.

We already see signs of unrest among the taxpayers. Some states are trying to curb Medicaid and food stamps. Some are trying to discredit programs by testing recipients for drugs. But cutting present programs won't head off poverty in the future.

Most of the present dependents are beyond qualifying for jobs that will get them out of poverty. So we need take steps to cut dependency in the future by attracting and preparing young people for economically successful careers.

Dependency exists because some lack the foresight necessary to sacrifice ditch-digging incomes today for executive wages in the future. Some lack the comprehension to understand the consequences of stupid decisions. They need a new paradigm that can be acquired most effectively through education and training.

Face it. We have come to the point where everybody who doesn't go beyond high school should be considered a dropout. Unless we get these dropouts into the learning system, the economic burden on society will escalate. And the lives that could have been productive positives will become dependent negatives.

Providing more training and more education may be costly today, but it is the only way to shorten the poverty rolls in the future. It will be cheap in the long run.

Free community college has its limitations. Some young people are not motivated to start. A considerable number never finish. The jobs available for associate degrees are limited. Nevertheless, free community college would be a beginning for many.

If we had the political will, we would bring back something like the G.I. Bill that sent millions of veterans to college after World War II and resulted in decades of American prosperity and job creation.

That history should be a lesson for us. If we can't learn from it, we are no different than those who are in poverty because they lacked comprehension and foresight.