



'No frills' U

## State needs to bolster colleges already in place

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A recent proposal for a "no frills" university in Pennsylvania has been the talk of higher education circles.

In a year when savings and cutbacks are the new norm for most families, this university concept -- with no dorms or athletic teams and a smaller price tag -- has piqued the nation's attention.

Newspapers as far away as The Boston Globe and The Toronto Star have done stories on the "no frills" idea coming out of Pennsylvania and last week's Chronicle of Higher Education contained an analysis piece under the headline "Do frills have a future?"

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The idea for a "no frills" university was one of nine issues in January the Pennsylvania Board of Education voted to recommend that the governor and Legislature consider this year.

At the time, the board was thinking of an institution that could serve mainly the adult and lifelong learner population, not so much your typical 18- to 22-year-olds.

The point about gearing a "no frills" institution toward adult learners seems to have been missed entirely in the discussions that have since been occurring among higher education thought leaders nationwide.

The Chronicle of Higher Education suggested that Pennsylvania look to Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, Germany, an old, nonresidential institution. However, Germany is not a great model given its own crisis in higher education funding.

The Boston Globe recommends looking at the satellite campus of Southern New Hampshire University in Salem, N.H., which caters solely to first- and second-year students. It's a place where students can pay 40 percent of the tuition of main campus and get their basic requirements out of the way.

Of course, Pennsylvania already has a similar system of satellite Penn State campuses, including one right here in Harrisburg that went from a two-year to a four-year institution with a dorm over time.

While the "no frills" concept is generating a lot of attention in Pennsylvania and beyond, the question remains whether the state needs to build a new university from the ground up.

Through the years, Pennsylvania has created a strong network of community colleges that are already doing much of the "no frills" style training, especially for adult learners. As online capabilities expand, the need for more bricks and mortar institutions will diminish even further.

Similarly, the private sector has come to realize how lucrative it is to cater to the "no frills" crowd. The University of Phoenix, for instance, has done just that and has been one of the most successful for profit higher education ventures ever.

If the state wants to help foster higher education opportunities in Pennsylvania, it should focus on expanding financial aid to students seeking degrees of all levels and to strengthening the institutions already in place.