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SERVING THE ALABAMA
GULF COAST SINCE 1813

P.O. Box 2488
Mobile, AL 36652-2488
251-433-1551

HOWARD BRONSON JR.
President, Publisher and CEO

MICHAEL MARSHALL
Editor

DEWEY W. ENGLISH JR.
Managing Editor

FRANCES COLEMAN
Editorial Page Editor

Editorials

Economy will suffer if college is out of reach

ALABAMA LEGISLATORS will stunt the state's ability to lure new jobs if they don't do something to make higher education affordable to working-class families.

Over the past couple of decades, legislators have shifted more and more of the cost of attending public colleges and universities from the state to students and their families.

The consequences of that policy can be seen in a study issued last week by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which gave Alabama an "F" for failing to provide affordable higher education.

Statistics show the chance that a ninth-grader in Alabama will attend college when he graduates from high school has fallen 12 percent in the past decade, compared with a national average decline of only 2 percent.

Over the years, Alabama leaders have rightly touted the need for higher education, but have systematically made it more and more difficult for many families to afford college tuition.

There are federal Pell Grants available for some students. And there are federally guaranteed student loans. But both programs have been cut by Congress in recent years.

While the federal programs have shrunk, Alabama has not picked up the difference, much less gone as far as it needs to go. In fact, the state offers almost no needs-based aid. Legislators tend to put college aid money into merit-based programs, which generally go to well-off students.

Alabama legislators can reverse much of this neglect by approving legislation being proposed by the Alabama Commission on Higher

Education that will seek funds for needs-based scholarships.

There are options for funding such scholarships. The state could fund them directly from tax revenues, although that could be a drain on other programs and could be easily taken away if other needs became pressing.

One option would be to dedicate a portion of oil and gas royalties Alabama receives, an amount that is likely to increase in future years. Another reasonable approach would be to create a state lottery, with proceeds required by law to go into a scholarship fund.

Georgia has done this successfully. Florida, too, funds scholarships through a lottery.

Ironically, Alabama residents help Georgia and Florida students pay for college by buying those states' lottery tickets.

It would be better to help Alabama students go to college by buying Alabama lottery tickets.

The study also found that Alabama does a bad job of preparing students for college, pointing out that low-income eighth-graders did poorly on standardized math tests. But education reforms to improve math performance are in place.

Legislators soon will be called upon to fully fund the proven Math, Science and Technology Initiative. They should.

Sound policies like funding this initiative can lead to more college graduates, which will help people find better jobs and, in the long run, help Alabama's economy.

Industries that offer good jobs require a higher level of skills than businesses used to require. With a better educated workforce, Alabama will be able to compete for new jobs.