

IN OUR OPINION

Getting into college not easy in Alabama

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Recently the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education graded all the states on five factors relating to getting a college education, which is increasingly important in the job market today.

In two of the categories Alabama did OK. We got a B-minus in completion — a good portion of the students who get in actually graduate. We got a B in benefits — students who graduate add significantly to the state's economy.

Unfortunately, we rate only a C in participation — the opportunities available for Alabamians to go to college. Worst yet, we got a D-minus in preparation — too few students take college preparatory courses.

And we got a flat F on affordability.

Affordability?

When you compare the cost of college with the means Alabamians have to pay for it, we come out 43rd in the nation in how affordable college is to our citizens. Since the average income in the state is well below the national average, even if college costs were low, a college education would still be unaffordable for many.

But our college costs aren't that low. On average, it costs more for a citizen of Alabama to attend a four-year college here than it costs citizens of neighboring states to attend their public four-year schools. True, some Alabama colleges are less expensive than others — Jacksonville

State University is a good buy — but the average cost to attend the average Alabama college is nearly twice the average cost in Florida.

It is just as bad, if not worse, in our two-year schools.

According to an analysis done by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, though Alabama's two-year colleges are less expensive to attend than our four-year institutions, the average tuition and fees at our two-year schools are significantly higher than neighboring states and well above the national average.

Now why is this? Why have we done such a poor job of making college affordable to average Alabamians, even though we know the economic benefits far outweigh the cost?

Put simply, over the last decade the people who govern us — governors and legislators — have steadily decreased the state funding for higher education, which has forced institutions to increase tuition and fees. Instead of raising revenue through fair and sufficient taxation, or finding alternative ways to help students afford college, our

leaders chose to tax Alabamians through tuition increases, which they can blame on the colleges when the fault lies with themselves.

And Alabamians, struggling to get the education that will improve their lives, are stuck with the bill. While down in Montgomery, no one really seems to care.

