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Earle Klay: Educators should heed a warning

Earle Klay
My View

When I was an undergraduate in the early 1960s at the University of South Florida, a legislative committee under Sen. Charley Johns forced our president to fire professors suspected of being either homosexual or communist. One of my professors was fired mid-term because he had traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1930s to learn about their system (ironically, that trip persuaded him to become strongly opposed to communism).

Due to the actions of the Legislature, the American Association of University Professors censured USF for many years thereafter, as a warning to future faculty members that the university could not be trusted to secure academic freedom.

Now the Legislature is establishing a warning to future faculty members that Florida is not a place where you can come to build a career and quality programs, without the risk that your life's work will be obliterated. As a veteran faculty member at Florida State, I see this happening already.

There are two reasons for the Legislature's actions.

One is that our economy and tax structure have long been addicted to growth. We are enamored with the idea that the only way to grow an economy, and tax the other guy, is to foster unending population growth on massive scales. But the real estate bubble has burst, for the immediate future at least.

The other is that many of our legislators subscribe to a questionable ideological assumption that government is just an impediment to the economy and that it should be shrunk as much as possible, even when your state already ranks dead last in per capita funding for higher education. They overlook the substantial amount of research across the globe that shows clearly that quality government, and especially public investment in brainpower, is critical to attaining a high standard of living. They are unwilling to consider this crisis as an opportunity to make Florida's state and local tax structure fairer.

According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (www.itepnet.org), the poorest 20 percent of Floridians pay over 14 percent of their income in combined state and local taxes, while Floridians whose incomes are in the top 1 percent pay just under 3 percent of their income for taxes in Florida. The ITEP researchers say Florida is one of the two most regressive states (placing the highest burden of taxes on the poor while taxing the richest the least).

To get out of a recession takes smart investing. Investing in the future brainpower of our young people is the smart way to go. But that is not where we are going. We shouldn't worry, though. When the economy comes back, our businesses with the really good jobs will go back to hiring young people from other states, where higher education is truly valued. And our kids will have plenty of jobs mowing their lawns and flipping hamburgers for them.

It's a Florida tradition.

Additional Facts

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