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Educational efforts need more support if Michigan is to recover

By Gary Schroder
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Michigan's economy isn't likely to recover in the short run unless the auto industry stabilizes, the housing market recovers and the national economy perks up.

In the long run, though, just about everyone agrees a better-educated Michigan work force is needed for the state to prosper in an economy requiring at least some college for good-paying jobs in health care, information technology and, yes, manufacturing.

But Michigan must provide more financial support for college students and working adults seeking training to improve their job prospects, according to a new study by the Michigan League for Human Services in Lansing.

College and job training are increasingly out of reach financially, particularly for lower-income families and workers, the league study found.

"It's becoming less affordable at a time when we need it more," league spokeswoman Judy Putnam said.

Average tuition at a four-year Michigan university in the 2007-2008 school year was \$8,508, compared with the Midwest average of \$7,374 and the U.S. average of \$6,185.

Tuition at Michigan's 15 public four-year universities jumped 20 percent from fall 2005 to fall 2007.

During the same period, Michigan's real median income fell nearly 2 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars to \$47,950 in 2007.

And for workers needing remedial education or a few classes to brush up on skills, there are virtually no scholarship or loan programs giving them up-front cash many of them need to pay for that training, according to the league study.

Some would argue that instead of providing more aid, Michigan should pressure its universities to lower tuition.

The universities argue they have cut millions from their budgets in the face of declining state support and have little choice to boost tuition to maintain the quality of the state's top-notch higher education institutions. It's not all bad news for college students and adult workers seeking to boost their skills, though.

High school students who do well on the Michigan Merit Exam are eligible to receive up to \$4,000 in Michigan Promise Scholarship money. That's roughly the cost of two years of community college.

The state's No Worker Left Behind Program pays up to two years' tuition for college or an approved training program for unemployed workers or those whose family income is less than \$40,000 a year. But there are long waiting lists because of a funding shortfall.

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