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## Our Opinion: Don't end employees' waivers for tuition

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The state of Illinois owes its public universities \$693.1 million, according to the Illinois Comptroller's Office.

State legislators, meanwhile, used their legislative scholarship privileges for this school year to send 852 students to those same universities free of charge, with the universities receiving no state reimbursement for the free tuition.

Now a **bill** in the legislature seeks to take away the 50 percent tuition discount that public universities currently offer their employees. This is a benefit that state universities have used for years to attract and retain desirable employees from clerks to professors.

Even without considering the state's utter financial abuse of these institutions in recent years, this is one of the worst ideas that we've seen in some time. It's bad on many levels, but we'll begin with the fact that this is a solution for which no one ever saw a problem. At a time of dire financial trouble for the state, its purported savings are such a pittance as to be laughable. Most of all, though, this is a misguided legislative attempt to conduct business that is best left to the universities themselves.

"There are reasons to give people pause to come to the university," says Southern Illinois University President Glenn Poshard, noting specifically the uncertainty of pension benefits and the state's consistent slashing of university funding. For SIU, that has meant a steady reduction from \$247 million in 2002 to \$217 million today. The ability to offer a tuition discount can offset some of those concerns.

"Any benefit we can have like this certainly helps us recruit the best people, but it's more than just faculty," Poshard says. Of the 402 students attending SIU's Carbondale and Edwardsville campuses on employee tuition waivers, 60 percent are children of university staff members who earn \$35,000 to \$40,000 annually. When room, board, fees and the remaining tuition are factored in, the employee waiver amounts to an 18 percent discount on the true cost of attending.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Luis Arroyo, D-Chicago, testified before the House Executive Committee last week that the employee waivers were worth \$387 million. According to the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the figure is more like \$8.16 million. (In fiscal year 2011, 2,234 students used the employee waivers, making the average waiver worth \$3,652.)

"The tuition waiver is important for many of our staff to get these low- and middle-income kids through college," Poshard says.

If the legislature is concerned about the finances of the state's public colleges, we suggest it find a way to get universities the hundreds of millions of dollars they are owed. For SIU, that figure is \$113 million. The University of Illinois is awaiting \$361 million. Illinois State University is owed \$46.8 million, and the list goes on.

These payment delays have forced colleges to adopt extreme measures, like mandatory unpaid furlough days, to make ends meet. Meanwhile, the steadily dwindling allotment of state funding to universities that began with the Rod Blagojevich administration has forced colleges to raise tuition.

State government has not been the best of stewards in recent years to its public universities. We can't figure out how slashing an important and sensible benefit— one not even used by many employees — for imagined savings will benefit anyone. This bill should die swiftly.