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Death By a Thousand Cuts: Higher Education in Illinois

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Testimony by Gretchen Knapp in February, 2004 to a General Assembly committee on higher education in Illinois.

I am here to give you the perspective from the Illinois State University classroom on how the budget cuts have affected student learning and access to education. My colleagues at Eastern Illinois and Northern Illinois University share my concerns.

Since the budget cuts, class sizes have increased, which is not conducive to optimum student learning. Certain courses have been cancelled or offered less frequently. This means that students may not be able to graduate on time.

Our IBHE-award-winning course for freshmen, Foundations of Inquiry, is the first general education class on the chopping block. This course guaranteed a small class atmosphere of 30 students and improved retention. And the course was a major recruiting tool to convince parents that their children would not be treated impersonally at a large public university.

Since the budget cuts, student access to the library has been limited as its hours have been cut. In response, students have volunteered their own work and study time to keep the library open longer hours. Their intent is honorable; however, we should not ask students who are paying for their education to replace trained librarians and library technicians who are there to help them.

Since the budget cuts, only bare-bones additions to the book, periodical, and electronic databases in the library have been possible. This does not serve our mandate to keep student learning current, especially in the fast-moving fields of science, technology, business, and nursing.

Since the budget cuts, even basic resources have become hard to obtain. In many units, staff and students must ask for toilet paper and paper towels. In some departments faculty must purchase their own zip disks and other storage media to use in "smart rooms" set up for technology.

Budget cuts at Illinois State have led to the removal of daytime building service workers from most of the campus area. In science labs, this has led to hazardous situations that have harmed people and damaged tax-supported equipment and buildings.

Deferred maintenance at the library has meant not keeping up with annual adjustments of the roof leak management system. Plus the library's electrical system has been rated so poorly that it may well be the next "Law and Justice Center" disaster. You may remember that the county's Law and Justice Center's electrical system literally exploded, closing the building for months — and costing taxpayers. Illinois State could not function without its library.

Other hidden costs of the budget cuts affect student learning. Faculty have tried to use technology to alleviate problems caused by restricted photocopying of class materials. But the lack of computer technicians and technical support has made reliance on computer technology to provide electronic readings, tests, and study materials very difficult. Add to that the lack of personnel to maintain and update existing software and hardware, and protect faculty and students against viruses — and you see a disaster waiting to happen.

For example, the Illinois State University Technology Fellows completed a program on using technology in the classroom last summer under the sponsorship of State Farm Insurance. Sadly, one of the major software packages faculty prepared for use in the fall semester could no longer be supported by the university, which could not afford the license.

Even the Faculty Technology Support Services division has lost staff and equipment to help faculty use technology to improve student learning. For example, faculty routinely made PowerPoint presentations into regular slides when giving talks to church groups and civic organizations that have slide projectors, but not expensive PC projectors. FTSS no longer has this capability.

While Illinois State's Foundation has started a successful capital campaign and established endowed accounts which can be used by selected departments for particular purposes, this is not an answer to the budget crisis, either.

The Foundation's board decided that there were to be zero disbursements on the endowed accounts for FY 04, and most of the funds that have been raised are estate gifts which will be useful decades from now when they are available — but certainly not now.

We appreciate that the budget situation is very difficult. But we also hope you realize that our students' learning is being affected by these cuts in the budget. We ask that you, the legislature, not cut our budget any further.