

Budget cuts unfairly target New York's college students



**JOSEPH G.
BURKE**

GUEST
ESSAYIST

Gov. George Pataki recently announced his 2003-04 budget proposal to deal with what he called the most serious fiscal crisis in our lifetime.

All New Yorkers must rise to this economic challenge and assist our governor and legislators in determining how best to allocate limited state funds. I suggest that our state representatives use the following four principles in dealing with the budget crisis:

- Share the necessary budget-cutting pain across all areas of public spending.

- Remember that statewide economic resurgence is highly dependent upon a well-educated work force, required to build high-tech markets.

- In tight economic times, first take care of those in the most need.

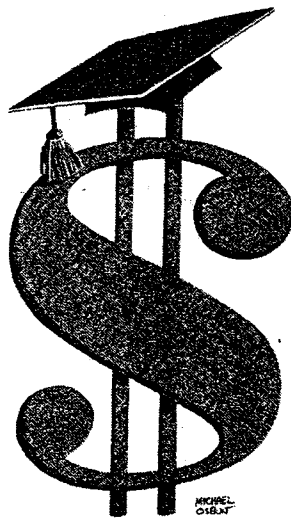
- In a budgetary crisis, delay new state-funded building construction and use some of the funds to ensure equal accessibility to K-12 and college education for the youth of our state.

I believe that the proposal now on the table in Albany violates each of these basic principles.

The governor's budget proposal does not distribute the pain evenly but puts a disproportionate burden on New York's educational systems. His proposal cuts overall state spending by 3 percent. However, it cuts K-12 spending by more than 5 percent, higher education spending by 11 percent, and the Tuition Assistance Program for needy college students by a whopping 33 percent.

Where's the equity here?

Education is a basic ingredient of any economic resurgence. When Gov. Pataki often talks about his vision for the eco-



MICHAEL
O'BRYEN

L.A. TIMES SYNDICATE

nomics future of New York, he emphasizes that it will entail modern, high-tech industries built on sophisticated management information systems and a well-educated work force.

Our public and independent institutions, at the urging of the governor and Board of Regents, have worked hard to create this future work force. We now have curricula designed to reduce our teacher and health service shortages while enhancing the quality of our graduates in many technology fields.

The governor's proposed cuts would greatly harm the advances we have made. The bottom line is that we can't have a high-technology work force if we don't have a supporting educational system. These proposed cuts, then, seem to violate my second fundamental principle of recovery.

In troubled times, New Yorkers pride themselves on coming to the aid of those who need aid most. Look at the courageous exploits of our citizens after Sept. 11, 2001. Yet, it is here, as a college president, that I have my greatest concerns. To be blunt, by reducing TAP to both public and independent college and univer-

sity students, I fear that the governor's budget proposal will greatly reduce access to college for those who need it most. This appears to be a violation of principle No. 3.

In essence, the governor proposes to reduce TAP payments by almost a third, and then repay the students years later when they graduate. This would require more than 283,000 students at public and independent colleges and universities to borrow more money to stay in school.

Yet within our independent sector alone, one in three full-time students comes from a family earning less than \$40,000 yearly. At Keuka College, students accumulate an average of more than \$20,000 in loans by the end of their undergraduate program.

Another \$6,600 average debt per student will force a large number of needy students to drop out of school and seek immediate employment. That would destroy the educational dreams of our neediest students, result in fewer qualified graduates in the marketplace and damage New York's economic future.

Finally, in this fiscal crisis, we should defer publicly funded construction until we can afford it. Yet within the governor's budget proposal, there is more than \$5 billion in new construction. How about delaying some of it and diverting these funds to TAP? Such a bold move would benefit needy New York students across our public and independent sectors. Can't we delay our construction plans for a year or two to ensure that our neediest students get to college?

I urge our state representatives to consider these four principles as they negotiate the final budget. We owe it to our children and to the future of our state. It just makes sense. □

Burke is president of Keuka College in Keuka Park, Yates County, and a member of the board of trustees of the New York Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities.