

## **Today's lesson: Fund higher ed State lawmakers get homework from concerned students.**

By Susan Simpson  
Staff Writer

Investing in education is investing in Oklahoma, college students from across the state told their lawmakers Tuesday during Higher Education Day at the state Capitol.

"It's not just about us getting a degree. It's about us leaving the state better than we found it," University of Oklahoma law student Ryan Owens said Tuesday during a program for the House of Representatives.

**\$171 million more sought**  
Oklahoma's public colleges and universities are seeking \$171 million in new funding for fiscal 2008, topping a record \$1 billion budget this fiscal year.

The new money is aimed at boosting per-student funding to the national average, for mandatory cost increases such as utilities and health insurance premiums, and for more student aid, mostly to the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship program.

Supplemental requests also are sought for \$75 million to pay for state matching dollars for endowed faculty jobs, and \$80 million for increased construction costs on campuses.

**What do students say?**

Teara Flags, a student from the University of Central Oklahoma, said she wants lawmakers to do more to reduce student costs.

She said students are relying more on loans to pay for college.

"Too many students are going into debt too soon," Flags said. "By the time they are seniors, they are working two or three jobs and still paying on their freshman year."

Valerie Jobe, an Oklahoma City Community College student, said a priority should be hiring top faculty members so students at every school get a quality education.

Still, securing more new money won't be easy after last year's record funding, said Senate President Pro Tempore Mike Morgan, D-Stillwater.

"The trick this year will be to continue the momentum from what we got last year," he said. "There are those in the building that think we did too much."

**What do officials say?**

State Higher Education Chancellor Glen Johnson said he continues to thank legislators for their funding for fiscal 2007, which allowed institutions to add 900 course sections and hire 233 new professors.

Johnson said \$80 million in new money is needed to close the per-student gap in funding.

Each Oklahoma student gets \$587 less than the national average in state funding, which affects the tuition costs.

Johnson said funding Oklahoma's Promise "may be the most important decision that affects our state."

Also known as the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program, it gives free tuition to students from families earning \$50,000 or less if they take a college preparatory curriculum, make good grades and stay out of trouble.

Gov. Brad Henry has proposed using a percentage of state income taxes to fund the growing program.

Lt. Gov. Jari Askins said a dedicated funding source is imperative.

"We must continue to step forward and step to the plate and do our part to make sure that all those that want to attend higher education in Oklahoma have that opportunity," she said.