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Shortchanging students

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At colleges and universities all over Illinois, thousands of students are sweating more than midterms this autumn. The 138,000 whose tuition is paid in part through the state's Monetary Assistance Program can't count on that aid next semester because lawmakers cut the funding in half.

Most MAP recipients cobble together their tuition with federal and state grants, student loans and whatever savings or earnings they can contribute. The MAP grants, which are based on financial need, contribute a big chunk of it -- up to \$4,968 a year. Without the money, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission estimates, a third of those students will have to skip next semester and another third will drop out altogether.

As state spending goes, MAP is a pretty good deal. It helps to buy a college education for many students from poor and working-class families who otherwise wouldn't get a degree. But now it's another casualty of Illinois' pass-the-buck politicians.

In July, lawmakers approved a \$26 billion budget that keeps the lights on and the state paychecks coming. They approved some significant budget cuts, but they pushed off a lot of hard decisions.

They failed to corral Illinois' massive pension costs, which are devouring more dollars every year. They failed to deal with the state's growing Medicaid and employee and retiree health care costs.

Instead, they agreed to borrow \$3.5 billion to make this year's whopping pension contribution. They postponed \$3.2 billion in payments to health care providers and other vendors, and called it a day.

Even with all the smoke and mirrors, Gov. Pat Quinn said the budget was still \$4 billion to \$5 billion short. But he signed it.

And there were collateral victims, such as the students who rely on MAP grants. The plan was for lawmakers to come back and fix things in January. That way, they'd know who has no opponents in the Feb. 2 primary election and thus can cast unpopular votes. And they'd need only a simple majority to pass an income tax increase.

But the students can't wait till January to get MAP money restored. Schools have to advise

students of their financial aid status well in advance of the next semester; for most of them, that means November.

It looks like something will be done in this month's veto session to rescue MAP grants. Quinn wants lawmakers to increase the cigarette tax by \$1 a pack and dedicate the money to MAP. Democrats are warming to that idea, though some would rather earmark the money for health care.

House Republicans are pushing a tax amnesty plan, which they say would raise \$105 million, maybe more. (A 2003 program that allowed delinquent taxpayers to pay up without penalty raised \$200 million, though supporters had projected only about \$40 million.)

Sure, we'd like to see the lawmakers restore some MAP funding. It's good to give a boost to low-income kids going to college.

But let's remember, this state has a lot of demands on it. The budget gave social service providers only 86 percent of the money they received the previous year, putting enormous pressure on them. Low-income college students aren't the only ones out on a limb.

Bottom line: The lawmakers and the governor have to make difficult decisions to save money on big-ticket spending items such as pension and health care costs. And they have to stop doing nonsensical things like approving \$40 million -- \$40 million! -- to build a campus for a college, Chicago State University, that didn't ask for it.

Illinois owes its pension systems more than \$80 billion in skipped payments and compounds the problem by failing to make reforms to its overgenerous and unsustainable retirement plans.

The lawmakers won't be able to build a public consensus for a tax increase unless they act responsibly on these issues.

Meanwhile, people like the students who rely on MAP grants for college get squeezed.