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Star Tribune Editorial

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Tuition breaks

McCollum restrains costs fairly

Only a bully would push his victim down, then kick him for not staying on his feet. That's why officials at American colleges and universities cringe these days at the mention of U.S. Rep. Howard McKeon.

McKeon, the California Republican who chairs the House subcommittee with jurisdiction over higher education, wants to do something about the steep hikes in tuition at the nation's institutions of higher learning. At public schools, those increases have a lot to do with state budget cuts, which in turn have a lot to do with the unwillingness of the federal government to help states cope with the revenue trough caused by recession.

A compassionate lawmaker would note the reason for the big tuition surge, and respond with the cash the federal government should have sent the states to prevent higher-education cuts two years ago. It might well take the form of incentives for colleges and universities to do their part to restrain tuition, by controlling expenses.

But compassion is not what McKeon wants to show the nation's colleges. He's brandishing a club instead. Last March, he proposed to cut off federal financial aid funding from any institution that raised its tuition by a rate more than double the rate of inflation for two years running. He softened that proposal in October, elongating the cut-off process to five years, requiring some intermediate cost-containment measures along the way, and sparing the nation's lowest-cost colleges and recipients of Pell Grants, which go to the lowest-income students.

Nevertheless, McKeon's proposed crackdown on big tuition increases feels like insult being added to the injury of double-digit state budget cuts in the past two years. It would be especially punitive in states — including

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Minnesota — that have been moving toward a high tuition-high aid model for funding higher education.

Last week, a group of House Democrats that includes Minnesota's Betty McCollum introduced a better alternative to McKeon's proposal. It replaces his stick with the carrot of increased financial aid outlays for schools that keep their annual tuition increases at or below the rate of inflation for higher education — a more realistic standard than the consumer price index used by McKeon. It also rewards schools that are willing to give each entering freshman a guaranteed cap on four years of tuition, enabling families to more accurately plan for those costs.

There is a stick in McCollum's measure, but it is poised where it belongs — over the heads of state legislators, not educators and students. To continue to receive certain federal education funds, states would have to swear off cuts in higher education funding. College funding could be held constant from one year to the next — an effective cut, since inflation would erode the money's buying power. But an actual cut would trigger the federal penalty.

Higher education is too important to this nation's future to be treated as it has been by states in recent years, recession or no recession. Another kick while the colleges are down isn't deserved — but some well-applied federal pressure at the 50 statehouses is.