Pell Grants haven’t kept up with cost of college

By Sharon Hartin Iorio

A great American hero, Claiborne Pell, died earlier this month. Millions have benefited from Pell’s good work, many of them without even knowing who he was.

It was Pell in 1973, who as a U.S. senator from Rhode Island sponsored legislation to provide federal funding to low-income students seeking higher education.

Today, the Federal Pell Grant Program, Pell’s legacy, continues to open doors to students at about 5,400 participating universities – students who otherwise might not have the opportunity for higher learning.

Over the past 35 years, the cost of postsecondary education has increased significantly, but the value of Pell Grants has eroded because of inadequate funding increases. Twenty years ago, a Pell Grant covered about 60 percent of a student’s cost of attendance. For the period that will end in June, the maximum Pell Grant is less than $5,000 per academic year – far lower than 60 percent of tuition, fees, books and living expenses at Kansas’ public universities or average costs across the nation.

Increasing Pell Grant funding is part of President Barack Obama’s proposed economic stimulus package. But critics already have begun opposition. There are two main complaints:

- A stimulus package should fuel the economy quickly. Although Pell Grants do support students for four or more years, thousands of recipients are currently, or soon will be, in their final semesters. Increased funding may make the difference for these students between completing a program or dropping out.

- Stimulus funding should go to those without work, not students preparing for work. Agreed. Those without work should be helped first and fast. The stimulus package does this by providing for skills training and assistance to the unemployed. This does not diminish the need to also increase Pell Grants.

Pell Grants make a significant contribution to a well-trained work force, preparing a wide range of students for 21st century citizenship and raising the standard of living for many Americans.

As the economy tightens, more students are having more difficulty finding funding to pay for their education. Pell Grants are need-based, and support undergraduate and certain postbaccalaureate students. The amount of support depends on the student’s family contribution, whether the student attends full or part time, and other qualifiers. The funding may be used by recent high school graduates and by nontraditional
students returning to the classroom.

Pell died at age 90 having lived long enough to see millions benefit from the legislation he promoted in the civil rights era.

Today, a different generation facing different problems still needs educational funding support. Increasing Pell Grants will help many young and not-so-young people realize their potential and help our nation move forward.

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