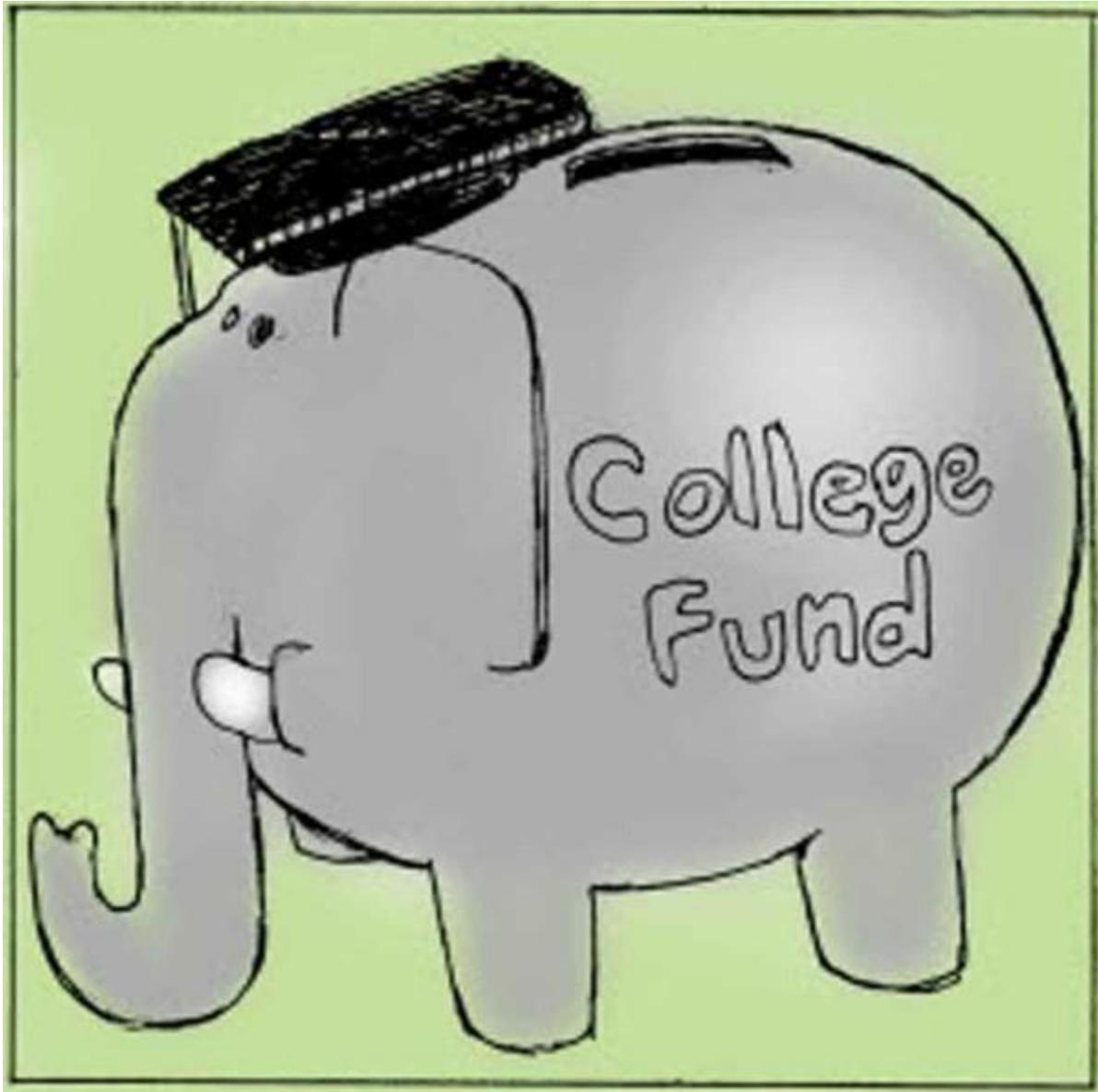


Bangor Daily News Posted Sept. 05, 2016, at 11:50 a.m.

By Joseph McDonnell, Special to the BDN

## **Solving Maine's student debt, workforce crises demand a collaborative approach**



An elephant is roaming the lecture halls in academia — the proverbial elephant in the room that looms large but which everyone pretends is not there because acknowledging it would require fundamental change.

The cost of a university education and the debt students are assuming to pay for that education has become an 8,000-pound elephant in the room. Student debt in the

U.S. [topped \\$1.25 trillion](#) this year. Two-thirds of students graduate with debt, which [averaged \\$37,172 for each graduate](#) this year.

The situation is even more unconscionable knowing how many students drop out without completing a degree or graduate without obtaining a job that leads to a career. Student debt holders with large loans and low-paying jobs have become modern day indentured servants, sometimes just managing to pay interest or even less, digging their debt hole deeper.

Universities alone cannot resolve the student debt crisis. Maine's public and private universities struggle to hold down tuition increases while trying to recruit, retain and graduate students in a state with a declining demographic of college-age students. Universities hope the federal government will deal with the debt crisis. But even though student debt has become an issue in the presidential campaign, no consensus around this issue has emerged and a quick federal solution remains unlikely.

There may be no silver bullet to this crisis, but the combination of a number of measures would make the problem more manageable: additional resources from the federal government, an interest rate for students close to bank borrowing rates, tax deductions and loan forgiveness programs, a cap on loans not to exceed a graduate's anticipated starting annual salary, reductions in university overhead and an imaginative use of cost-saving technology to drive down tuition costs.

Exacerbating the debt crisis are the many students graduating without career-oriented jobs. College graduates earn [on average \\$1 million more over their lifetimes](#) than those without a degree, but that's averaging high-earning degrees such as engineering and finance with low-earning degrees. Students majoring in professional programs such as accounting, nursing and engineering find ready employment with good salaries and benefits. But many others struggle, often ending up underemployed at jobs that do not require a degree and sometimes working at the same job they had while attending school.

Career readiness ought to be built into a university education, but many universities struggle to reconcile that mission with a liberal arts education. Liberal arts and career development need not be mutually exclusive; a four-year curriculum has room for both. There is strong evidence that a liberal arts degree has long-term value for personal development, civic engagement and career advancement. Graduates in these programs could complement their undergraduate education with a professional graduate degree, but many students are reluctant to double down on their debt by attending graduate school.

For advanced students, universities could combine the liberal arts degree with a professional graduate program within the four years traditionally reserved for undergraduate education. In the very least, universities could give students strong entry-point skills for career-oriented jobs.

Meanwhile, Maine is headed toward a crisis with older workers retiring without skilled younger workers to take their place. The Maine Department of Labor reported that [only 62 percent of the population participated in the labor pool](#) last year, down from 69 percent in 2000 — a sign that a higher percentage of the population is aging out of the workforce. The Department of Labor projects that [nearly 25 percent of Maine residents](#) will be 65 or older in just six years. Training young workers to replace a retiring workforce ought to be an urgent task for the state, its employers, colleges and universities.

Maine colleges and universities graduate thousands of students each year, yet the skills these students are bringing to the workforce often are not aligned with the needs of many of the state's employers. The patchwork approach of linking students to employers — even with the best of intentions from universities and employers — is less than optimal. Maine would be better served by a statewide effort to bring the skillsets required by employers and college and university education closer together.

Such an approach could assist Maine's employers to recruit students years before graduation with internships, apprenticeships, part-time jobs and academic programs that tie together their education and career preparation. Employers could become co-educators alongside faculty and might attract and retain graduates with student debt forgiveness programs.

We can begin to tackle the student debt crisis and the state's urgent shortage of workers by forging imaginative approaches to these pressing problems.

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