



Henry right to veto last-minute bill

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LAWMAKERS showed wisdom in approving record funding for higher education for the coming year. Many faculty will get raises, and colleges will be able to offer the courses students need even with record enrollments.

But that wisdom must have taken a short vacation when legislators approved a separate bill to take over tuition-setting power from higher education officials. Gov. Brad Henry was right Monday to veto this one.

Not only was it outside the scope of a special session designed solely to craft a budget, but it's hardly in the best interest of students or taxpayers. Rather, it was angry Senate Democrats firing a parting shot at people who should be their political friends and House members up for election too scared to vote with common sense. The game playing surrounding this last-minute bill is one reason why Henry acted to keep tuition rates out of the political arena.

Until five years ago, lawmakers had tuition rate authority, and they used it as a political football, raising tuition only in nonelection years. They wisely gave it up -- with conditions -- so that those who were closer to students and better understood their needs could set tuition rates. Ever since, some lawmakers have been trying to wrest the power back.

It's true that tuition increases in recent years have not been pretty. Not long after the power shift, state revenues plummeted, causing budget cuts and steep tuition increases. Colleges have spent much of the last few years hoping for a rebound in state appropriations. It wasn't until last year that state funding to higher education caught up to pre-budget cut levels. Meantime, higher education officials worked hard to increase the amount of scholarship money available to students.

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to students to offer the best faculty, course selection and curriculum possible. That takes money. Higher education officials have stayed well within the caps lawmakers placed on tuition increases, and enrollment is at an all-time high. So lawmakers should back off and let colleges set tuition rates as long as they don't abuse the power and exceed the caps.

This was a bad bill. By nixing it, Henry sent a message of his own to those who might have wished to make him squirm, while living up to his reputation as a governor who cares about education.