

# Nation's economic woes hit students hard

"I worried through my whole winter break," says senior marketing major Barbra Thomas. "During New Year's dinner, I was sitting there watching my dad carve the turkey, and in my head, I was secretly crunching numbers. All I could think about was whether or not I was going to have enough money to pay my tuition bill."

A college education has been a lifelong dream for Thomas, and she isn't leaving the fulfillment of that dream to chance.

these tough times call for creative solutions. For instance, NIU psychology major Jordan Simon sells porcelain figurines on eBay to pay for books and odds and ends. "I go to garage sales and find them for a few bucks. I can usually sell them for a profit online," she says.

Thomas and Simon are certainly not alone in their need to bring in additional income. According to Bob Burk, director of NIU Admissions, more than half (51 percent) of incoming freshmen surveyed say they will need to work to help pay for school.

### **Times are tough all over**

According to the 2008 Illinois Policy Survey conducted by the NIU Center for Governmental Studies, nearly half of the families in Illinois (45 percent) are feeling worse off financially than they did a year ago, and they worry about what the year ahead holds for them. The number of families feeling worse off jumped 20 percent compared to last year and is at the highest level ever measured in the survey's 25-year history.

"As difficult as the economic crisis has been on many of us, it's been even more difficult for our students," says NIU President John Peters. "Students across the country are getting squeezed harder than ever as their college funds are getting hammered...many of their parents are losing their jobs...and tuition costs continue to go up."

According to Sandy Baum, economist for the College Board, students' struggles are, in part, a result of declining government funding for public universities. To make matters worse, college costs are rising. Liz Pulliam Weston, personal finance columnist for MSN Money, agrees. "The retail cost of a college degree has more than doubled in the past two decades, far outstripping the regular rate of inflation."

Like all public universities, costs at NIU have gone up. The recommended budget for a current NIU student is more than \$20,000 a year after factoring in expenses like insurance, housing, fees, transportation, and books. "Rising costs are a concern. Especially when you consider that more than 30



Like many college students across the country, Thomas has taken matters into her own hands. For her, that means working two jobs to pay tuition.

A full-time student in the College of Business, Thomas spends her mornings doing research and clerical work in the communications department of the NIU Foundation. Every weekend, she drives to her hometown of Lockport where she waits tables. "Over break, I picked up every shift available at the restaurant—even during snow storms when barely anyone came in," she adds.

But, Thomas considers herself lucky. "A lot of my friends can't even find jobs," she says. Some NIU students have found

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percent of our incoming freshmen are first-generation college students and 38 percent of them say financial considerations were a factor in their choosing NIU,” says Burk.

“The days of paying your way through college by working a job or two are over,” says Mike Malone, vice president of university advancement at NIU. “These days, it’s not uncommon for students to work two jobs and still need several loans.”

And the price tag for those loans is significant. According to CNN Money, the average graduating college senior leaves campus carrying a lot more than a newly minted diploma: he or she also carries an average of \$20,000 in debt.

The last thing we want is for students not to come to NIU...or to have to leave...due to financial considerations,” says President Peters. “So we’re doing everything we can.”

One way the university has responded is by creating the Huskie Advantage Program. Here’s how it works: imagine a student whose parents both work and have a combined \$52,000 income. That student would qualify for a state grant of \$3,300 and a federal grant of \$890. However, he would still have an unmet tuition need of \$1,960—an amount he could not impose on his cash-strapped family and for which he could not get an affordable loan. The Huskie Advantage plan would cover that shortfall for the student’s freshman year.

### **Every little bit helps**

“Our students also have some powerful allies in their corner: NIU friends and alumni,” says Peters.

“Donors give to NIU because they want to help our students,” says Mallory M. Simpson, president and CEO of the NIU Foundation. “Getting students the help they need is much more difficult with the economy in the shape that it’s in now, but we will never stop working toward that goal...A scholarship can keep a student in school.”

Music major Clarice Castilho, knows very well the difference a scholarship can make. She says she was speechless when her mother sold her house back home in Brazil to help finance her education. The sophomore says she’ll never forget that selfless act, not to mention the vote of confidence behind it. She remembers having similar feelings of awe and gratitude when she opened her scholarship letter. “I can’t believe people I’ve never even met could be so generous. They have opened doors for my family and me.”

Thanks to sacrifice on the part of her entire family and the Clark family scholarship, Castilho is busy at work preparing for a career in teaching and music. She puts in many hours of

strenuous practice, but she says her investment of time and energy are the least she can do considering what others have invested in her.

As soon as Castilho makes her dreams come true as a professional musician and teacher, she plans to pay the favor forward in honor of those who have given her so much. “I really hope I can do the same thing for others someday,” she says.

All of Barbra Thomas’ hard work over break paid off when she came back to campus this spring semester with the money to pay her tuition bill on time. “I just squeaked by, but there’s no way I would have done it without my scholarship,” she explains. “And how can I even express how grateful I am to my scholarship donor, Herb Eldean? It’s really nice to know I’ve got someone in my corner,” she says.

“Nationally, colleges and universities are seeing modest declines in private giving, but people *are* still giving,” Simpson stresses. “In fact, we ended the calendar year in December on a high note: with two new six-figure commitments.”

Adds President Peters, “While we start this year with some uncertainty, with the help of our alumni and friends, we can give our students the optimism, hope, and most importantly, the resources they need to stay in school.”

**For more information about True North and how you can help, call 815-753-1386 or visit [www.TrueNorth4NIU.com](http://www.TrueNorth4NIU.com).**



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*We have raised \$140 million to date.*

*Our alumni and friends’ continued confidence and support are more important now than ever and we have never been more grateful.*

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