

A College Education Is Worth More Than This

A Commentary by K.J. Manchester

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Talk is cheap. So is the Rhode Island State Budget Committee, at least from the point of view of a student at a Rhode Island public college or university. *The Providence Journal* recently reported that over the past five (5) years state aid to higher education operating budgets has been cut 30%, while expenses have risen 47%. Left with a combined average of 31% of operating expenses being covered by state aid, the Community College of Rhode Island; Rhode Island College; and the University of Rhode Island have been set adrift in a sea of financial turmoil, their only lifeline the tuition and fees that students pay to attend – tuition and fees that has been outpacing the rate of inflation for the past two decades. Why should this matter concern Rhode Islanders as a whole?

According to the *Providence Journal's* "Reinvent Rhode Island" series, "Rhode Island employers are having difficulty finding employees with the skills needed for high-tech industries". The chatter one hears coming from the General Assembly's chambers suggests that the goal is to market Rhode Island as a highly skilled hub – the Information District, as it has been called. I cannot be the only one who sees a large disconnect between what is proposed and the reality that exists, can I? The one way to close this gap is the completion of a higher and/or specialized education, but Rhode Island citizens are being priced out of learning these skills due to the ever increasing costs of higher education that are a direct result of constant cuts to the same. We can no longer afford to put off funding higher education in Rhode Island; the Day of Reckoning has arrived.

Last year the now disbanded Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education (RIBGHE) chose to freeze out-of-state tuition at our colleges and university in order to avoid losing the students who pay this higher tuition rate. However, to cover the rising costs of education in the face of a short budget, in-state tuition was raised considerably for the 2012 – 2013 academic year – 9.5% at the University of Rhode Island; 7.5% at the Community College; and 4% at Rhode Island College. The New England Board of Higher Education reports that these increases come on top of tuition increases already made in recent years, resulting in an average tuition increase of 47% at the four-year schools from 2006 to 2011. Institutional records show that at CCRI, a two-year college, tuition has also increased by 47% over the same time period.

How is it possible that costs have risen 47%, tuition has increased 47%, state aid has been cut by 30%, and yet the colleges and university are not operating in a deficit? The answer is simple: class offerings have been reduced, class sizes have been enlarged, and student services have been cut. The result of these measures has been devastating to the state of public higher education in Rhode Island, with students being shut-out of necessary classes, due to a lack of availability, and receiving less personalized attention from faculty and academic support staff. Students are paying more and receiving less.

There are those who would argue that tuition increases are unavoidable yet, as has already been stated, the increases that have been implemented have far outpaced the rate of inflation; those who employ our state's public college students did not offer 37% - 47% pay increases to help cover the added cost of their employees' education. In fact, with the Rhode Island economy as depressed as it is, Rhode Island employees have been lucky to see raises at all.

Considering the changing demographics of our state's college students, it cannot be assumed that students can fall back on their parents to assist them with the increased costs of attaining a college degree or vocational certificate. Demographic breakdowns show that an average of 25% of our state college students are over the age of 25 (9% of URI enrollment, 40% of CCRI enrollment, and 25% of RIC enrollment). Many of our state's public college students are supporting families of their own. If the choice comes down to paying the rent or paying tuition, education loses. In a case such as this the Rhode Island economy loses as well, in the form of fewer employers choosing to locate within our borders. Even the most high-tech Engineering firm still needs Receptionists; Administrative Assistants; Sales and Marketing Reps; Security; Housekeeping, and other middle and lower-skilled personnel. This is in addition to industrial supplies needed to run the business, contracts that would be awarded to other local businesses.

Although it sounds cliché, there is much truth to the saying "If you build it, they will come". The time has come for Rhode Island to build its economy by building its workforce. An investment in higher education will bring this to pass. RIBGHE recently announced its decision to hold the line on tuition for the upcoming academic year, but this decision must be accompanied by a sizable increase in state aid at a time when the governor has requested sizable budget cuts. Rhode Island's State Legislators have proven that they can talk about the economic problems our state is facing; the time has come for them to show the people that they can do more than pontificate by providing a workable solution, starting with increased aid to higher education. As of this writing, Rhode Island ranks 48th out of 50 with regard to state tax dollars allocated (per student) to fund public colleges and universities.

It is short-sighted and self-centered to suggest that students who seek a higher education pay for it without state assistance. How many people are willing to purchase a home in an area where paved roads and city services are not a part of the package? How many homeowners would be willing to take out a mortgage if the interest on that mortgage was not tax deductible? These allowances are a form of government assistance to those who seek to achieve the American Dream, a dream that is more likely to be achieved through higher education. Just as homeowners pay taxes to pay their fair share of municipal costs, students also pay taxes with the expectation of receiving state-sponsored services in return. Just as home ownership improves the economy of a community, so does higher education.

In the past, bond issues related to the funding of higher education have passed with an overwhelming majority of the electorate's approval. However, like student loans, bond money must be paid back with interest. We as a state must show good financial sense and fund our institutions of higher learning through proper budgeting, not borrowing, which in turn will have both immediate and long-term ripple effects for our state college students, starting with a lower student-debt load upon graduation. I plead with you as a Rhode Island citizen to write to your state legislator and demand an increase in funding to our state colleges and university. The future job that is created as a result of this investment just may be your own.

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University of Rhode Island. The views expressed in it are her own, and have in no way been endorsed by her employer or by the University of Rhode Island.

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