

BRINGING BACK PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION



In case you've not noticed, things are tough in public higher education.

Here in the northeast, the situation is particularly difficult. Twenty years back, many responded to the economic recession by moving south and southwest. Those who stayed had fewer children, so two decades later, we are left with a shrinking pool of high school graduates. Competition for fewer prospective "traditional college age" students has become more pointed, especially with private institutions offering discounts and amenities that state schools struggle to match. And though the cost of delivering a quality public education rises annually, legislative appropriations as a proportion of the budget continue to decrease. The resultant fiscal gaps could be filled by passing on costs to students, but that won't do. Affordability and access matter, especially for students out there who aren't "traditional" or "college age."

Despite institutional efforts to remain reasonably priced, many students choosing to attend a public university struggle to make ends meet. Too many students work too many hours. They borrow too many dollars. They encounter too many economic distractions and too many structural barriers. Engagement, persistence, and achievement suffer. Attentive to such challenges, schools invest in success-

focused co-curricular programming, additional personnel to advise and coach, and new technologies to engage students "where they are" (i.e., on their phones). To cover some of the mounting costs associated with these endeavors, campus leaders have intensified fundraising efforts, efforts that can be complicated by having to help potential donors understand why "affordable, regionally focused, state-funded" institution needs private money.

From where I sit, it's difficult to track and manage so much change, especially in budgets. Public university leaders are held ever more accountable for controlling costs while ensuring that students not only are well taught in the classroom but also receive assistance in other key settings, such as residence halls, counseling centers, and academic support offices. Most public institutions are also looking to augment revenues by bringing to campus more international students, increasing non-credit offerings, filling otherwise empty residence halls during the summer, etc. But in a fast-paced competitive marketplace, investment capital-poor teaching universities can struggle to innovate.

The challenges notwithstanding, I remain committed to public higher education. I see the difference it makes in the lives of those we serve. I honor the opportunity it offers to students from a broad range of lived experiences. I'm all in.

So what's missing? Investment.

We need more financial resources. We also require more champions, allies with political influence to advocate on behalf of educating an increasingly diverse population of students bound to their home regions. I have seen that with appropriate support and structure, students at schools such as mine ultimately achieve. Families benefit. Communities prosper.

I close with two exhortations. First, share our story. Assist others in understanding what college is really like at a state school in the late 2010s (not "back in the day") for students, for faculty, and for staff. Second, cultivate your inner activist. Engage with elected officials in your locality to make the case that they fund our future. We deserve no less.

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