



## An Integrated Approach to Affordability

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**H**ow much states invest in public higher education, how much public colleges and universities charge in tuition and fees and how much states provide in need-based student financial aid are three legs of a proverbial stool. But you would never know that from the way these higher education policies are pursued in the New England states. Forging an integrated approach to these three policies would be a sensible first step in making college affordable in New England.

New England's public college tuition and fees—like its private college tuition and fees—are the highest in the United States. And in the past two years, public college charges have risen faster in New England than in other regions. In Massachusetts last year, charges at some public institutions rose by 25 percent or more.

Yet no New England state increased funding of need-based student scholarships at even half the rate that tuition and fees rose, until Rhode Island doubled its state aid program this year. Meanwhile, tuition discounting and increasingly popular merit-based aid programs may direct dollars away from the students who need it most.

As Dennis Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, recently warned higher education leaders in Massachusetts, states often make decisions about tuition and decisions about student aid as if they have nothing to do with each other.

The result is predictable yet profound. While overall college enrollments

rise—as they usually do in a down economy—many qualified, lower- and middle-income students are priced out of public higher education. All our rhetoric about the democratization of higher education in the six decades since the G.I. Bill is suddenly in grave doubt.

New England state legislatures devote fewer tax dollars per capita to public higher education, both institutions and state aid programs, than other Americans do—\$169, compared with \$221. Expressed another way, New Englanders invest less than \$5 per \$1,000 of their incomes in public campuses and state student aid programs, while taxpayers nationally direct \$7 of every \$1,000 of their incomes to these purposes.

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This underinvestment is easily rationalized by New England's policymakers, because Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth and their famous private kin are there to shoulder New England's higher education reputation. Spending on public higher education is "discretionary." Unlike health care and K-12, for example, higher education appropriations can be conveniently shifted: a pair of student shoulders is always waiting.

Or is it?

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education found recently that American families spend nearly a quarter of their incomes on average to send one child to a four-year public campus; in New England, the share of income devoted to higher education is substantially higher. A group of higher education leaders convened last year by the national Society for College and University Planning acknowledged that "we don't have sufficient information about what fee levels can be tolerated before individuals get priced out."

Meanwhile, we're beginning to see stories in the popular press about college students who are unable to return to classes because of rising costs. And we know the message is going out to families, especially immigrant and minority families, that college costs too much—that it is not for them.

This is more than a lost opportunity for New England. The wage premium associated with higher education is becoming familiar to everyone—the more years you go to college, the more money you earn over your lifetime. But a college education promises much more than earnings power. People who go to college vote more than those who don't. They are more likely to serve on civic boards or otherwise participate fully in public life. It's time to re-commit New England to the ideal of college access. It's time to make college affordable.

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