

CONNECTION

NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL
OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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E D I T O R ' S M E M O

One delegate to the New England Board of Higher Education noted half-jokingly at the board's recent semi-annual meeting that adequate public investment in higher education *should* fit squarely in the conservative agenda. "You may not want to give poor children breakfast," outgoing Rhode Island Higher Education Commissioner Americo Petrocelli told the group. "But any self-respecting conservative should want to give children the means of earning their own breakfast. And higher education is the means."

In reality, the Republican-controlled Congress has proposed gutting a variety of grant and fellowship programs, while paring federal loan programs and reducing federal spending on civilian research and development by one-third over the next seven years. The New England states, meanwhile, have been notoriously thrifty in their state appropriations for public higher education and student scholarships.

Even Petrocelli's argument that higher education allows people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps has been perverted. If a college education offers individuals such a remarkable return on investment, the reasoning goes, then it should be up to individuals to pay for it. A growing body of data shows that one result of that logic has been exploding student loan debt. New England students borrowed about \$1.8 billion in 1994 alone. To what extent students and families have simply been scared off by the price of a college education is harder to quantify.

In any case, the notion that college — being such a good investment — should be financed with the same sort of long-term, individual sacrifice as, say, a home, doesn't do much good for families who are already paying a mortgage. Indeed, you might think homebuilders, car dealers and a host of other retailers would be pressing for stepped-up public investment in student aid, since students buried in loan debt will presumably buy fewer big-ticket items. But don't hold your breath.

So who will stand up for higher education?

College students — 815,000 strong in New England — might be expected to form the first line of defense, right? Not necessarily. Even as students' futures are clouded by political decisions, their interest in the political process is plummeting. A significant 19 percent of U.S. college freshmen aren't sure they will have enough money to complete college, according to the national survey of freshman attitudes conducted annually by the University of California, Los Angeles. Meanwhile, the share of freshmen who consider "keeping up to date with political affairs" important has dropped to just 29 percent, down from 58 percent in 1966.

The sad fact is that by cutting so close to the bone on programs for children, the elderly and disadvantaged, budget-slashers in Washington and elsewhere could make it difficult for even higher education's most eloquent defenders in the academic, business and government communities to make the case for greater investment.

This edition of CONNECTION explores the sorry state of public investment in higher education and some of the innovative approaches colleges, universities and others are forging in response to and in spite of it. As always, we thank our contributors for clarifying the issues.

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We tend to consider our commitment to regionalism unquestionable, so we were a bit embarrassed by a recent letter from Arvin R. Anderson, a guidance counselor at North Country Union High School in Newport, Vt., regarding the cover of CONNECTION's special FACTS 1996 directory issue. "I notice the cavalier manner in which southwestern Connecticut and Grand Isle County, Vermont, including one half of Lake Champlain (Vermont waters) were cut from your cover map of the region," Anderson protested, adding, "There arose within me a certain ire when the Massachusetts islands were dutifully noted in the middle of the blackness." Our apologies, of course.

John O. Harney is the editor of CONNECTION.