

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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EDITOR'S MEMO

Now and Then

I have to confess that in the crush of deadlines, I was tempted for a brief moment to dust off a *trends* commentary from the early 1990s for double duty. Back then, you may recall, a tanking economy was squeezing New England state budgets, and the states, in turn, were squeezing public higher education: *disinvesting for the future*, if you will. Then, like now, the burden of dwindling resources was falling where it always falls, on the shoulders of students and families. Tuition and fees at New England's public colleges were heading skyward, as they surely will again.

Also in the early 1990s, like now, there was talk in some quarters of smashing up the higher education *structure* and replacing it with a new one. (Indeed, the University of Massachusetts president's office was on the chopping block then, as it is today.)

A dozen or so years ago, like now, there was the frustrating realization that when the economy does rebound and jobs reappear, New England will face skilled labor shortages in key science, engineering and technology fields. Then, like now, that realization threatened to accelerate a drift toward higher education-as-job training, at least for those lacking the wherewithal to attend the region's world-class, private liberal arts colleges.

And now, like then, war pervades the higher education enterprise and threatens to sap its strength. War, it turns out, is the Mother of All Higher Education Trends. This time around, the USA Patriot Act and its kin have cast Big Brother as the new Big Man on Campus, compromising privacy and free speech in academia and militarizing university research agendas. Moreover, before a new invasion of Iraq began, the anticipated cost of military operations there, combined with proposed tax cuts, began crowding out education priorities in Washington, such as restoring the lost buying power of Pell Grants for lower-income students. The grants now cover less than 40 percent of the cost of attending a four-year public college, compared with nearly 80 percent in the late 1970s.

To make matters worse, the higher education investment policies of the 1990s make it more difficult for lower-income families to absorb such a setback. As Iowa higher education analyst Thomas Mortenson has noted: "The federal tax credits exclude people too poor to pay federal income taxes from program eligibility. The prepaid tuition and college savings programs are useful only to families with discretionary income available to set aside for future higher education purchases. The merit scholarship programs are strongly tilted toward the affluent, and when they are financed by lotteries, such programs are paid for largely by the poor."

Fortunately, we are not quite back where we started. Our distinguished commentators in this issue also lay out the positive effects of rising educational attainment, the arrival of student-centered learning and the promise of productive inter-institutional cooperation aimed at doing more, or almost as much, with less. And our special annual *Trends & Indicators in Higher Education* feature, prepared by Michael Thomas and Sue Klemer of the New England Board of Higher Education's Department of Policy and Research, provides some reasons for optimism about the small region that has reasonably claimed to be America's higher education capital. The data show, for example, that New England continues to outperform the nation in percentages of people with college degrees and that the region posted important and significant gains in enrollment of minority students during the 1990s.

We trust that this latest effort to take stock of *Trends & Indicators* provides New England policymakers with a baseline reading of higher education's strengths and weaknesses and a sense of where improvement is needed most. And we hope no editor will have reason to reactivate this piece in, say, 2013.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.