

# CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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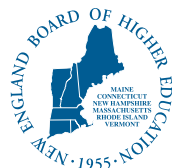
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## EDITOR'S MEMO

# 861,625

Of all the numbers packed into CONNECTION's 2005 *Trends & Indicators* issue, one will be cited throughout the year by reporters, economists and regional boosters as a sort of gauge of New England's demographic and educational vitality: 861,625.

That's the record-high number of students enrolled on New England's college campuses. And it would be cause for celebration in this region that lives and dies on brainpower if not for the suspicion that a few well-funded access initiatives for low-income New England residents and a few well-conceived recruitment strategies aimed at foreign students could push that magic number much higher.

The lucky 861,625, meanwhile, confront some sobering new possibilities, ranging from being stripped of their federal student aid, to being denied the opportunity to hear dissenting voices, to being drafted.

The high stakes facing this group make the findings of another research endeavor doubly disturbing. The national survey of college freshmen conducted annually by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles reveals that just one in three entering college students consider "keeping up to date with political affairs" to be very important or essential.

Even if you figure that upperclassmen and graduate students acquire political awareness as they progress from freshman year onward, it seems safe to assume that a fairly large segment of today's students lack the political engagement to see troubles coming, much less to head them off.

If they haven't kept up to date with political affairs, they probably missed the U.S. Education Department's recent tightening of eligibility for federal Pell Grants—unless of course they were among the million-plus needy students who will see their aid slashed as a result. They may have heard that the Bush administration has also proposed raising the maximum Pell Grant for lower-income students by \$500. But do they know the grants have been allowed to shrink so much in value that they now cover less than half the cost of attending a four-year college? Or that the administration would also nix Upward Bound and Talent Search programs that help lower-income students become the first in their families to go to college? Ditto for Perkins Loans, the low-interest student loan program whose distribution formulas historically have favored the blue states of New England.

Politically uncritical students may even swallow the recently revived crackpot theory that rising college tuition is actually *caused* by federal student aid. They may not ask nor care whether the "journalist" they're reading is on the government payroll.

The irony is that, in some ways, today's college students are *more* engaged than their predecessors. Many performed community service in high school. Many who must now work longer and longer hours to pay for college are getting a valuable firsthand look at the types of jobs performed by Americans without college degrees. And many have displayed the political backbone to stick up for lower-paid campus workers and other aggrieved parties.

Now the question is can they help their own cause.

If this noble 861,625 can mobilize to expand aid programs for needy students and stanch the flow of human and financial resources to more military adventures, they could leave quite a legacy—their activism could help push that magic New England enrollment number past 1,000,000.

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*John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.*