

## Affordable College an Investment in Labor Force

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This month, New Jersey's state colleges and universities are setting tuition for the 2007-2008 academic year.

Trustee boards' decisions are resulting in increases students and families will find quite manageable. This will happen despite the fact the institutions receive far less from the state than they did two years ago, with new state-imposed spending mandates.

Slower growth in college costs will occur because:

- Trustee boards know that public colleges must keep tuition within reach of the students they serve.
- These institutions have continued to make strides in efficiency, cost control, and leveraging their limited resources.

A [recent poll](#) of likely voters Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates conducted for the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and universities showed college affordability has been, and still is, a top public concern in New Jersey and elsewhere.

The poll found 51 percent felt tuition at state colleges is affordable, while 36 percent said it is not. Almost six out of 10 said state colleges and universities are less affordable than they were two to three years ago.

The main cause of tuition increases are state funding cuts and rising personnel costs, the poll correctly identified. One-half said state funding cuts are an "extremely important" reason for rising tuition. Three out of 10, or 31 percent, said faculty and administrative salaries are an extremely important reason.

State college affordability looms large because likely voters view these as quality institutions that offer high value. Better than seven out of 10, or 71 percent, say the state colleges and universities have either an excellent or good reputation, while 63 percent say they deliver more value per dollar than private colleges and universities.

New Jersey has neglected for too long its responsibility to expand its public colleges' capacity to serve more residents and make the necessary investments to keep college affordable. The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities is determined to lead with a plan and a promise.

The nine institutions - The College of New Jersey, Kean University, Montclair State University, New Jersey City University, Ramapo College of New Jersey, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Rowan University, Thomas Edison State College, and William Paterson University - have vowed to do all they can to keep the promise of affordable, high-quality higher education for citizens. This commitment, which we call [New Jersey College Promise](#), was unanimously endorsed by our association's leadership last month.

The goals include:

- Building on information directly from citizens about affordability concerns, translating these concerns to policy action to expand college access and increase affordability.
- Soliciting some of the best minds in the nation and state to advise on how we can move our institutions from third highest position among the 50 states to No. 1 in productivity, and pass cost savings on to students and families.
- Creating a legislative and policy agenda for affordability that emphasizes what both the State of New Jersey and the institutions can do to keep student costs down, including maximizing current flexibility and protecting public colleges from political interference.

The New Jersey College Promise affordability agenda will include giving institutions more control over certain costs inflated by the state, including workers' compensation; allowing more partnerships with private-sector contractors and providers to gain spending efficiencies; and resisting pressure to increase fees paid by some students.

Do voters agree that Trenton should grant more authority to campus trustee boards and administrations? It would seem so, our opinion research shows. Asked about whom they would entrust with the decision about wise spending of new funds, those polled selected nonpartisan trustee boards over state agencies by 8 to 1, and over the governor and Legislature by 6 to 1.

An affordability agenda is not only the right thing to do for students, it is the right thing for every one of us. High public college costs and limited public college capacity are a quiet menace to New Jersey's economic future. Montclair State University's President Susan Cole recently pointed out New Jersey already loses more than 32,000 students a year and imports about 5,600 - unlike any other state. She correctly calls attention to the negative effect of this imbalance on the future of our workforce, a threat to individual and state prosperity.

The New Jersey College Promise will result in substantial student savings if a broad cross-section of citizens who care about college opportunity get behind policy goals supporting affordability. Our expert consultants and our institutions' leaders will outline steps the colleges can take and what the state can do to help make college more affordable.

Ultimately, the state colleges and universities are the people's institutions, run by and for the people. Our poll shows most people don't realize how fully they serve New Jersey residents: only 15 percent correctly estimated that nine out of 10 students are state residents.

Today, more than ever, the colleges' futures and promise of public service and opportunity for all remain in the hands of the people of New Jersey.

*Similar articles appeared in:*

*Hopewell Valley Times, July 26, 2007 - "A Promise of College Affordability in the State"*

*The Times of Trenton, July 25, 2007 - "A Promise to Tackle State College Affordability"*

*Home News Tribune, July 18, 2007 - "Affordable College an Investment in Labor Force"*

*Daily Record, July 16, 2007 - "Colleges Working to Stay Affordable"*