

College Affordability is Attainable

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These days college affordability is on many people's minds. New Jersey is no exception for we have among the highest tuition and fee costs in the nation for public baccalaureate/master's level institutions.

Tuition increases for 2007-2008, set this past July, will be moderate, averaging 6-7%. That is no accident but it is also not the result of robust state funding.

Increases have been kept moderate despite the fact that 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 happen mainly because of two things, very much related to each other, that residents of the state can be confident about:

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

College affordability concerns were confirmed by a recent Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates scientific poll of likely voters which our Association sponsored. While 51% of likely voters say tuition at state colleges is affordable, 36% say it is not. When asked about the trend line on tuition, nearly six out of ten say state colleges and universities are less affordable than they were 2-3 years ago.

Likely voters also correctly identified causes for tuition increases, the main ones being state funding cuts and rising personnel costs. One-half of New Jersey voters say State funding cuts are an "extremely important" reason for rising tuition. Three out of ten (31%) say faculty and administrative salaries are an extremely important reason.

State college affordability looms large because likely voters view these as quality baccalaureate/master's institutions that offer high value. Better than seven out of ten (71%) say the state colleges and universities deliver either an excellent or good reputation. More than six out of ten say they deliver "more value per dollar" than independent sector colleges and universities.

New Jersey has neglected, for too long, expanding its public colleges' capacity to serve more residents and making the necessary investments to keep college affordable. In response, the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (ASCU) on behalf of its nine member-institutions is vowing to do more to make college affordable *whether or not the state decides to invest more*.

The nine institutions are: 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. This commitment to affordability, which we call *New Jersey College Promise*, was unanimously endorsed by our Association's leadership this past June. 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. We will also seek to overcome unnecessary barriers to creative partnerships with private sector contractors and providers to gain spending

efficiencies - the kinds of partnerships that are done by many enterprising higher education institutions in other states.

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

An affordability agenda is an agenda for the public good as well as regional prosperity. No one with the preparation to go to college here in New Jersey and then join the workforce in this state should have to deprive themselves of an education because they are afraid of the price tag.

Will *New Jersey College Promise* really result in substantial student savings? It will be if a broad cross-section of citizens who care about college opportunity learn about it and get behind policy goals supporting affordability. Our expert consultants and our institutions' leaders will outline steps the colleges can take and what can be done by the State to help make college more affordable. However, in light of so many other competing State priorities, only direct citizen action can raise college access and affordability to a higher priority level. When this happens we may also be more likely to get the needed State investment in capital improvements that will alleviate our institutions' need to pass academic facilities construction and renovation costs on to current and future students as tuition and fee increases. Other states invest regularly in their higher education facilities. So should we.

Ultimately, the state colleges and universities are the people's institutions, run by and for the people of the Garden State. I stress this because our poll shows that most people don't realize just how fully they serve New Jersey residents: only 15% correctly estimated that nine out of ten students are state residents.

Trustees and presidents at our institutions do not take the affordability issue lightly. Neither does our association. We are all ready to do more. We just need a little help moving in a direction we have begun to outline.