



NEW JERSEY

Association of State Colleges and Universities

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QuickTakes!

An Interview with Mike Klein

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Starving the Beast, Endangering the Future

By Diccon Hyatt

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By 2020 about 68 percent of jobs in New Jersey will require a college education, according to a study by Georgetown University. And the most popular place, by far, to get those degrees is at the state's public universities. But with funding for those universities dropping off every year, will the students of the future be able to afford them?

That's one of the questions raised in a new documentary, "Starving the Beast," which takes a look at the ideological battle that is being waged for the future of higher education around the country. The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) is hosting a free showing of the movie on Wednesday, April 12, at 7:30 p.m. at the Princeton Garden Theatre, followed by a discussion with NJASCU CEO Michael Klein.

"People in higher education circles have been discussing this documentary," Klein says. The film, directed by Steve Mims, opens with Democratic political operative James Carville giving a commencement address at Louisiana State University.

"They say education is a commodity," he tells the students. He's referring to conservative politicians around the country who believe education is like any other good or service, and that a free market will inevitably offer better options for students than a state-sponsored system. They want to pull back taxpayer funding for public colleges, and in many states, they have been getting their way. Education traditionalists, like Carville, vehemently disagree, and the documentary lets advocates on both sides hash out the issue.

The title, "Starving the Beast," comes from a conservative idea that big government can be "starved" by depriving it of tax revenue. On the other side, educators warn that cutting education funding will have devastating consequences for the future.

Klein says the debate is less ideological here in New Jersey, where pro-business Republicans are less zealous about cutting funding for colleges because the economy of the state depends

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*The College of New Jersey
Kean University
Montclair State University*

*New Jersey City University
Ramapo College of New Jersey
Rowan University*

*Stockton University
Thomas Edison State University
William Paterson University*

on an educated workforce. Instead, funding for public higher education has tended to rise and fall along with the state's economy.

It was under a Democratic governor, Jon Corzine, that the state college system received its biggest funding cuts, during the Great Recession, Klein says. Subsidies of colleges have stayed low under Gov. Chris Christie. In 2017, it stayed flat at around \$184 million after dropping more than 7 percent the year before. As a result, the state now only pays for 20 percent of the budget of public colleges throughout the state. The rest of the funding comes from tuition, as well as the creative ways that educational institutions have found to raise money.

"Higher education has always been called the balance wheel of state funding," Klein says. "That's the idea that higher education in bad times will always be cut, and in good times it will always get increased, in recognition that there's always another funding source, which is tuition. Institutions can always turn to students for funding." Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, has expressed that governors must always make the choice between funding higher education and Medicaid.

Former Iowa senator Tom Harkin, a Democrat, gave a different view, arguing that states have effectively forced these cuts on themselves by cutting their taxes too much. (Essentially, the beast is starving.)

"My feeling is that it's a combination of both," Klein says. "Higher education is an investment in the future, and you're not going to see that pay off right away, but if you put the money into health and human services, you immediately help people get back on their feet, or low income families get better housing. There are so much more immediate needs, so it's more difficult to make that investment in the future."

New Jersey faces another kind of dilemma. The *Abbott* ruling – a 1985 court decision that public education in some poor communities did not meet constitutional standards – forced the state government to devote money to K-12 education, but not higher education.

"This documentary resonates really strong for New Jersey," Klein says, pointing out that the Garden State has the fourth highest in-state tuition cost in the country for its public four-year institutions. The average New Jersey resident pays \$13,560 a year in tuition, while out-of-state students pay about double. The state heavily subsidizes low-income college students and has a robust scholarship program. As a result, about a third of public college students graduate with no student debt.

"On a per-student basis, New Jersey is one of the leaders in the country in providing financial aid," Klein says. "But why do we have to provide so much of it?"

The public has shown a willingness to subsidize higher education. In 2012, voters approved a \$750 million bond for higher education buildings.

The institutions that are members of the NJASCU benefitted from the bond, which Klein considers a big win for his group. The organization, a non-profit, includes The College of New Jersey, Kean University, Montclair State University, New Jersey City University, Ramapo College, Rowan University, Stockton University, Thomas Edison State University, and William Paterson.

Notably absent are Rutgers and NJIT, and the reasons for this go back to the founding of the NJASCU. The group came into existence in the 1980s, when the state's public universities and colleges were considering consolidating into a single system along the lines of the one in California. They decided not to, but they did form an organization to advocate for their interests in Trenton. The public colleges not part of the consolidation discussions are also out of the NJASCU.

Klein has been with the group since 1998 and has been its executive director since 2012. His political background has helped him navigate Trenton's corridors of power. Before joining the association, he was assistant counsel to Governor Christie Whitman, and before that was a legislative director to Republican Leonard Lance, a congressman who was then a state assemblyman.

Education runs in his family, however. Both of his parents were educators, with his father serving as an elementary school principal and his mother teaching kindergarten. Klein graduated from Princeton in 1987, majoring in history, before studying law at Boston College and earning a doctorate in higher education at NYU. Klein says he has always loved "nitty gritty policy work" and that he had "a very nerdy goal of speaking at Oxford and Cambridge," noting that he recently ticked that goal off his list during an educational conference.

Klein says the public has many misconceptions about higher education funding. For example, he says that while polls show most people appreciate the value of a college education, many do not distinguish between schools that offer wildly different qualities of education.

He says another persistent myth is that tuition is rising because of college administrator salaries and sports programs, but the reality is that college administration only makes up a small percentage of budgets, and that schools without Division I programs (most New Jersey public universities) don't spend much on sports.

The real reason for high tuition, he says, is a combination of rising enrollment and budget cuts. Since 1990, funding has fallen 46 percent per student, while enrollment rose 63 percent.

Klein says that if funding continues to drop off, the state's public colleges do not risk closing their doors. The main danger is that tuition will continue to rise, and that many students will be discouraged from getting a college degree. That could have devastating effects for the

state, he argues, especially when studies show that New Jersey is already losing population due to students moving away to work and study in different states. (The University of Delaware is the single biggest thief of New Jersey college students, with about 800 enrolled every year.)

Klein is an advocate of the benefits of lifelong learning, noting that people who get college education become better citizens, volunteer more, vote more, and are more environmentally conscious than counterparts who only finished high school.

But the most compelling argument for boosting public higher education is the need for educated workers. Currently 62 percent of all New Jersey jobs require some college education, and about half of those require bachelor's degrees or higher. That figure is only going to rise.

"Our institutions are the BA engine," he says. Almost half of all bachelor's degrees in the state come from the handful of institutions represented by the NJASCU.

As a result, higher education funding is the rare issue that both labor unions and pro-business groups like the NJBIA and chambers of commerce are on the same side.

"Why should we fund higher education?" Klein says. "Because our workforce needs it."

**Starving the Beast, Princeton Garden Theatre, 160 Nassau Street, Princeton.
Wednesday, April 12, at 7:30 p.m. Free**

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