



NEW JERSEY

Association of State Colleges and Universities

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QuickTakes!

NJASCU CEO Michael Klein Leads a Discussion about State Support of Higher Education Institutions

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Loose Ends: Affordable education is a beast of a challenge.

While the 60 audience members were feasting on food for thought and popcorn, the discussion taking place at Princeton's Garden Theatre April 12 was focused on starvation – particularly state-government fiscal starvation of public higher education institutions. The Trenton-based New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) hosted a free screening of the documentary "Starving the Beast," with a post-screening discussion led by Pennington resident Michael Klein, the CEO of NJASCU.

The film conveys, through a series of interviews with academics, administrators, and governing board officials some fierce and destructive political and philosophical battles being waged at public higher education institutions in Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and North Carolina.

Dr. Klein – aided by a Power-Point presentation and two decades of policy research and advocacy experience in the higher education arena – presented data about New Jersey's public institutional financial challenges, relative to the situations described in the film. He noted that over the 25-year period from 1991 to 2016, state-operating appropriations to New Jersey's state colleges and universities decreased by more than \$8.4 million. Across all of New Jersey's public institutions of higher education, per-student funding dropped nearly 40 percent over the same time frame as enrollment at public institutions increased by more than 100,500 students, about 58 percent.

My first reaction to the film was a greater appreciation for how good things are in New Jersey – yes, shockingly good, despite the reduction of direct state aid. New Jersey's public higher education institutions are renowned throughout the world for high-quality and diverse academic offerings, excellent graduation rates, and consistently modest tuition increases. Even though tuition is relatively high (as in New Jersey's cost of living), the education is

www.njascu.org

*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*

affordable, because state aid grants are among the highest in the nation. Also, the facilities at the institutions have been substantially improved thanks to the voter approval in 2012 of a \$750 million bond act – the first state-backed financing of higher education facilities in New Jersey since 1988.

Is this excellence sustainable considering the dwindling state operating support? I work for Dr. Klein, known to me as Mike, whom I first met when he was a student at Princeton University, class of 1987. Only after I watched “Starving the Beast” – presenting some apocalyptic scenarios for the future of public higher education – did I ask him:

“Now what? Is there any hope?”

“The state colleges and universities for the past two years have been flat-funded, and considering the fiscal challenges facing the state, I do not think the colleges and universities can count on increased operational support,” Mike said. “But I do see some ways that the state can help sustain the health of our public higher education institutions without further burdening taxpayers or increasing student tuition and fees.”

Those include:

Restore the public-private partnership program that, because of a political log jam, expired in August 2015. The program had financed enormously successful redevelopment projects at our public institutions, most locally, Campus Town at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), a privately financed, mix-use development on the TCNJ campus.

Reform the procurement and construction provision of the State College Contracts Law, whose mandates put the state colleges and universities at a considerable disadvantage when doing major construction projects.

Provide regulatory relief from those statutes and regulations that cost the schools millions of dollars and fail to pass the common-sense benefit test, such as the environmental rule that requires public colleges to obtain special approval to recycle consumer electronics, like computer parts.

Mike also suggested looking to certain states like Washington, which is not mentioned in the film, that have made exceptional progress in keeping the cost of a four-year public college/university education affordable without starving the institutions. In 2015, Washington’s public colleges and universities agreed to cut tuition by up to 20 percent over two years after lawmakers agreed to provide \$200 million to make up for the shortfall. The deal aimed to roll back tuition increases over the previous 10 years; some of Washington’s universities had doubled tuition, after state funding fell 20 percent per student after the recession.

After watching “Starving the Beast,” I became hungry for practical – not pie-in-the-sky – solutions to keep colleges healthy and fit, and satisfy the needs of their students and all the residents of the state. NJASCU’s proposed menu of reforms seems like an excellent place to start.