

Newsday Long Island Topic, December 14, 2003. What Price Knowledge? Skyrocketing public university tuitions may put college out of reach by Alan Singer

Our society says it values education, and we tell our young people to value it, but then we saddle them with enormous debts. High tuition charges at public universities are in effect an unfair tax on youth and against their future.

And it's about to get worse.

The State University of New York, after a 28-percent, \$950 tuition increase in June, is back for more, with Chancellor Robert King eyeing another hike for 2004. King, New York State legislators, Gov. George Pataki and the SUNY board of trustees are debating whether university officials should be able to institute automatic annual tuition increases. University officials want to avoid their annual pilgrimage to Albany to ask for more funds. Politicians would not mind a mechanism that shields them from the responsibility of approving what is perceived of as essentially a tax increase. Advocates of the proposal claim it will create a "rational tuition policy" that will benefit students and parents by making college costs more "predictable."

Tuition at SUNY for New York residents is now \$4,350 an academic year. But the real cost for a year at a public college, including books, fees, clothing, room and board and transportation, is approaching \$20,000.

Meanwhile, federal loans are capped at \$5,500 per year for undergraduates. A student representative on the board of trustees charges that the recent increase forced students to take out additional loans and work extra jobs, interfering with their academic performance and compounding debt problems when they complete school.

But so far no one is addressing the fundamental issues. If widespread higher education is a social good that enhances the skills of the population, increases economic productivity, expands the tax base and makes our country more democratic, it should be paid for by the society as a whole much the same way kindergarten through high school education is supported. If it is a private privilege that only benefits the recipients, costs should be paid for by individuals and their families, the same way we pay for cable television or the family car.

There is certainly a precedent for increased government support for higher education as a social good. Up until the mid-1970s, there was general agreement in most states and at the federal level that government should provide much of the funding for public higher education. After World War II, the GI Bill made it possible for returning veterans to attend college and pursue careers. During the Cold War with the Soviet Union, increasing access to higher education was seen as a vital weapon in the arsenal of freedom. After the Soviets launched the Sputnik satellite, the federal government directed large sums of money to private and public universities to fund scientific research and science education. As a result of that support, state university systems rapidly expanded across the country.

Part of the problem is that the federal student loan program, which in the 1960s promised to make higher education more affordable, has backfired. It directed money to individual students to pay tuition costs but not to the states or schools as subsidies. The only way institutions of higher learning could get federal dollars was by raising tuition. A program intended to make education more affordable for students has made it prohibitively expensive.

I graduated from the City College of New York in 1971. It sounds hard to believe now, but because of the City University's no-tuition policy, the cost of four years of college was about zero. School fees averaged about \$50 a year, but they were more than offset by a New York State Regents Scholarship.

Fast-forwarding 30 years, few things are free, including tuition in the CUNY system. My wife and I helped our children finance their higher education, but despite this two of them finished school with thousands of dollars of debt. They were forced to mortgage their futures to get an education.

Studies by the Nellie Mae Corp. a leading provider of student loans, show that the experience of my children is far from unique. Tuition increases coupled with an expansion of loan-based student aid means that the average graduate of a four-year college leaves school owing \$18,900, a two-thirds increase since 1997. According to a 2002 survey, low-income students and students from minority families have felt

particularly burdened by these debts. Many low-income students can no longer afford to attend college and higher costs have led to a growing dropout problem. We risk the increasing segregation of our society.

Adding to these problems is that since 1980, real wages for young people ages 25 to 34 in the United States have declined by more than 15 percent. Our country is asking college graduates to pay more and to borrow more in an economy where it will be difficult for them to repay their loans. To make matters worse, unemployed college graduates, and people who borrow money but never complete school, cannot seek bankruptcy relief from their loan payments.

The commitment to inexpensive public higher education still exists in much of Western Europe, where college tuition costs are heavily subsidized, tuition remains low and in some cases is entirely free. In the United States, however, the end of the Cold War meant our government could abandon its commitment to educating its people. Many states now provide less than one-third the cost of public higher education, forcing students to pay the rest. This money is used to cover basic operating costs and to repay debts incurred by the universities when they expanded in the 1950s and 1960s. It is rarely used to enrich the education of the students who are paying the bills.

It is time that we formally recognize higher education as a human right that benefits society as a whole and should be free to all, a principle that is included in the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In the early 1970s, I joined a coalition picketing the New York City office of Gov. Malcolm Wilson, demanding the preservation of the no-tuition policy at the City University of New York and its extension to the State University system. As tuition costs mount and the cost of debt payments skyrockets, it is time that we resurrect the battle cry, "No Tuition at SUNY and CUNY."