

Statement to the VT Senate Education Committee on Free Tuition legislation

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Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak. For my part, I want to emphasize the idea that higher education is a public good, not just a private benefit.

I agree with the previous commenters. Deep investments in higher education floats all boats, more effectively than cutting taxes.

But I think there's a danger in speaking of free tuition as if it were a series of benefits that translate merely into income or jobs for this or that group. What we're talking about is not free as in free lunch or free beer. Free tuition is "free" as in a free society. Free tuition is about building a world in which thought, knowledge, and imagination are the fabric of everyday life, not a secret society for a privileged few.

Too often when we talk about college, we speak in terms of specific benefits for specific people. High school students are told, "Come here for success." "Come to college so you can get ahead." And we talk a lot about competition. The University of Vermont, like so many research universities across the country, ends up trying to pay for things by charging very high tuition to students from out of state, and in order to attract those students, it gets stuck on what my colleague Beth Mintz calls the amenities treadmill. UVM builds expensive amenities like grand student unions because that's what our competitors are doing. The dilemma is that, eventually all of us have big student unions, so there's no longer a competitive edge, and yet we have to raise tuitions even further to pay for it all – and students go further into debt or get priced out completely. That expensive amenities treadmill helps explain why only 30% of UVM students come from Vermont, down from more than 50% thirty years ago.

Free tuition can help us get off that treadmill.

Access to higher education, it's true, will help the child born into modest circumstances make a higher salary and lead a better life. But a ten year old from a modest background in, say, Winooski, should be able to look at that big University across the river and see not just economic opportunity, but inspiration, a possibility of a wider, more open life. Too often, the only message that kid gets is that whatever goes on there, it's too expensive for them.

Talking about higher ed as a public good sounds very grand and idealistic, I know. But to be honest, I think we have no choice but to speak in these terms. We have a hard job ahead of us. UVM needs to be part of this legislation, by principle and politically: without at least some net gain for UVM in this effort, I don't think it has a chance. But why should Vermont taxpayers foot part of the bill for, say, teaching and research about the mathematics of complex systems or neuroscience or Indo-European languages?

The answer is that we all benefit from a more curious, engaged, smarter society. We are in dire straits nationally in part because the skyrocketing cost of higher education has effectively denied ordinary people access to the means for understanding why climate change or evolution make sense. And then us professors wonder why some people have come to distrust us and what we say.

I think we really need to start talking about how the *general public* can benefit from thriving and accessible higher education. That general public benefit is not a particularly quantifiable thing, but it is real. The academic and scientific research, the personal growth and intellectual questioning which happen inside colleges radiate outwards like the ripples of a stone dropped in a pond; they make things better, more open, and more creative for everybody. So, yes we need free tuition, but not free as in free lunch; it's free as in a free society. Higher education is a public good.

Thank you.