

## **President's Post #42: NJ Colleges Crumbling Under Cuts**

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As we set our sights on commencement, less than two months away, I am reminded of the many touching moments of the day: jubilation in our students, pride in the eyes of their parents. Beaming mothers and fathers will recount their son or daughter's challenges in becoming the first in their family to graduate from college. I am reminded of the value of public higher education.

Annually, New Jersey's colleges and universities send 37,000 newly minted graduates into the world. They leave behind aging campuses that years of financial disinvestment have left with outdated buildings in need of repair, and significant debt incurred in building and repairing facilities to meet the demand for seats. Twenty-four years have passed since New Jersey last provided general obligation-backed capital funding.

But it appears that this governor and this Legislature are prepared to invest in higher education. I applaud them. No doubt they are following the recommendations of the Governor's Task Force on Higher Education, which was chaired by former college president and Governor Tom Kean. In it, the task force concludes that New Jersey's colleges and universities have been underfunded for too long.

"After years of neglect, New Jersey needs to help build academic facilities for a 21st-century education at our colleges and universities, protect existing resources and take the burden for financing these projects off the backs of students," the panel wrote.

At Ramapo College, and all of our sister institutions, we have spent years trimming our budgets, cutting everything possible without detracting from the stellar yet affordable educations we provide. Students and their families have seen tuition increase at a rate that cannot be sustained. The time has come for New Jersey to deal with this critically important issue.

During the past several years, the New Jersey Association of Colleges and Universities, which represents the nine state colleges, and other higher education entities have proposed a bond referendum that would provide capital funds to repair leaky roofs, rebuild outdated science labs and create hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs across the state as architects, engineers, electricians, plumbers and laborers go to work. The cost is high, but that should not stop the Legislature and Gov. Chris Christie from supporting a fair and equitable capital funding plan that will create jobs and lay the foundation for the hopes and dreams of generations of students to come.

So it will be up to the people of New Jersey to decide the fate of higher education. There are a few facts that they should know:

- New Jersey ranks among the top five states in the funding it provides for K-12 education, but the situation is exactly the reverse for public higher education, where it

ranks in the bottom five. At Ramapo College, less than 25 percent of the operating budget today is provided by the state. A decade ago, the figure was nearly 50 percent.

- Or, to make the point another way, Ramapo College receives the same amount from the state today that it received in 1994, when there were a third fewer students.
- There is already a capacity problem as some 36,000 high school graduates leave New Jersey to attend college. Many of them do not return. We can't afford to allow our public higher education facilities to deteriorate further.
- The world's most robust economies, by contrast, are paying particular attention to support for higher education, recognizing the connection between an educated workforce and economic prosperity.

And as our elected officials hammer out what this referendum will look like, we hope they will consider a mechanism that would provide for a revolving fund to make capital funds available regularly. A referendum every quarter-century to support ongoing higher education needs is not a feasible long-term solution.

I believe this referendum should go before the people of New Jersey, who want so much for their children, as soon as possible. They deserve no less.

Sincerely,

Peter P. Mercer  
President