

BERGEN RECORD OP ED

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AT RAMAPO COLLEGE

On September 4, Labor Day, the 820 members of the freshman class of Ramapo College of New Jersey will walk in single file up the hill from the Bill Bradley Sports and Recreation Center. As they pass through the arch which is the symbol of the College, I will have the privilege of welcoming each one. It is a wonderful ritual and one repeated in reverse on graduation day when those same students will walk down the hill, again passing through the arch, but in their graduation regalia with all the faculty and staff lining the walkway and applauding their accomplishments.

Ramapo is designated as New Jersey's Public Liberal Arts College. Why would the State of New Jersey do so? Shouldn't the state be interested in practical education?

In reality, no education is more practical than a liberal education, meaning simply, education that develops or liberates the powers of the intellect. The ability to reason, to analyze problems imaginatively and to communicate intelligently is indispensable in a world where adaptation to constant change is necessary. The economic evidence is also irrefutable: those whose education has provided them with the ability to think critically and communicate effectively will earn the highest incomes. As the economist Anthony Carnevale has stated, "in the knowledge economy, education allocates earnings; work alone is not enough". Gone forever are the days of earning high pay by working hard at an assembly line job right out of high school.

My students know this and their parents know it. Equally important, the rest of the world knows it. Consider for example, the rapidly growing economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRICs). All four countries are dramatically increasing investment in public higher education as a vital component of their economic strategy. The implications of that strategy were considered by a team of economists and planners at Goldman Sachs in a 2003 study called "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050". The top G6 world economies today are the United States, Japan, Germany, Britain, France and Italy. The study concludes that in less than 40 years, the G6 combined economies will be smaller than the BRICs economies taken together.

When it comes to public investment, New Jersey's legislators and Governor Corzine are in a difficult bind. The state deficit, in the billions of dollars, is real and there can be no easy fix. Indeed there is in such difficult times a particular need to root decisions in sound public policy that goes beyond the expedient. Otherwise, over time, the larger issues become decided virtually by default.

When I look at the experience of Ramapo College, I fear this may be happening with public higher education. Twelve years ago, the state of New Jersey provided 54% of Ramapo College's operating revenue. That number has fallen each successive year until

it now stands at 30%. The implications if this trend continues are clear. Furthermore, Ramapo College has funded its conversion from a commuter school to a residential one without capital support from the state. Consequently, and the situation would be worse without the generous support of our benefactors, almost 13% of the College operating budget goes to service debt incurred to build student facilities.

Our students and their families have to this point shouldered most of the offloaded burden. This year tuition was increased by 8%, the maximum allowed by the state. For the most part they have been willing to do so in order to preserve the quality of their education. And the quality is acknowledged to be high. The just-released 2007 edition of *U.S. News and World Report's* survey of *America's Best Colleges* again ranks Ramapo College as the top public comprehensive college in the northern United States. Even when the independent colleges, with vastly more resources, are added to the mix, Ramapo stands at number eight. We have done well with the resources we have.

But even with the 8% tuition increase and a higher intake of freshmen, Ramapo College has this year cut more than \$3 million dollars from the operating budget. Starting the budget planning exercise many months ago, before the state fiscal crisis became clear, meant that we were able to make the cuts partly through attrition. Nevertheless, virtually every area of discretionary spending has been reduced. We have been able to stick to our priority of adding five additional full-time faculty; however, our full-time faculty numbers remain proportionately well below those of the other state colleges.

Replenishing our excellent faculty and facilities will be essential to our ability to deliver the teaching and research that characterize a first class education in the global knowledge economy. It is something to which our Trustees, administration, faculty and staff are all committed to at Ramapo College. Isn't that what we all want for the citizens of New Jersey?