Public College or Private Business? Virginia’s Higher Education Problem

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Background

With the financial consequences of the Great Recession still impacting states heavily, Virginia’s ability to economically support its 15 public higher education facilities has become a massive challenge. As Virginia pushes forward in its attempts to combat these outcomes, access to higher education should be at the forefront of their agenda. Equal access to higher education for all students in Virginia cannot be met through the state’s current economic policies. The inadequate amount of money spent on funding for Virginia’s public universities is only the beginning of the state’s inability to sufficiently support its higher education programs. Research of Virginia’s budget and policies regarding higher education shows a sharp decrease in the amount of state spending per full-time student, ultimately hurting low-income and middle class student’s ability to access higher education. Through a close examination of federally and state funded investigations of higher learning institutions, along with scholarly studies done by individuals and groups, such as the College Board, prominent in the field of education, I have found that within the state of Virginia, significant portions of Virginia’s budget have been taken away from higher education over the past 20 years. This finding is indicative of Virginia’s inability to fund the vast number of students entering college and the current amount of power Virginia’s legislators and governor allow every university’s board of visitors to have over their schools budget.

Introduction

According to the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia (2013), Virginia’s comprehensive public four-year institutions are among the top 10 least affordable colleges in the United States for FY2014 (pg. 14). Over the past decade, from 1991 to 2011, college tuition in Virginia increased 217% (Trends in Higher Education Funding, Enrollment, and Student Costs, 2013, pg. 46). Access to higher education has become one of the greatest priorities in policy for the United States and in Virginia. However, Virginia has failed to take financial responsibly for their 15 public four-year colleges and universities, making college a private enterprise controlled chiefly by the board of visitors at each school. Declining state support per FTE (full-time equivalent) student and the increasing amount of revenue per student each school collects is indicative of Virginia’s public colleges turning into private businesses. State government’s inability to control the board of visitors and create caps for tuition and fee increases is yet another example of how the state government carelessly watches over their public institutions. With massive increases in auxiliary and non-academic funding in each of Virginia’s 15 public colleges and universities, tuition and fees will continue to increase significantly faster than the rate of inflation. These increasing prices then bring about the question of accessibility. How can students access college if the state does not monitor the costs more efficiently? Higher education will no longer become an attainable goal for middle class families; instead it will only be attainable for the small portion of the upper class. Equal access to higher education for all students in Virginia cannot be met through the state’s current economic policies.

Results/Discussion

When examining affordability of college, I researched three main areas of tuition increases: declining state support, Virginia’s decentralized higher education system, and auxiliary funding. Under Virginia law, the government has vowed to keep education affordable by attempting to maintain a 67%-33% cost-share between students and the state (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2013, pg. 9). However, for the first time in Virginia, the cost-share relationship for FY2014 was estimated to be 51% student and 49% Virginia for covering tuition and fees (JLARC, 2013a, pg 9). This means that students are now funding a higher portion of their education than the state and that the state is far from meeting its goal in terms of the cost-share relationship. Virginia also fails to maintain proper control of its public colleges’ board of visitors, who currently have no limit to how high they can raise tuition and E&G fees. Between 1991 and 2000, Virginia state legislature set several caps for increases in tuition and fees resulting in a 40% increase during that time. However, between 2002 and 2012, the state took less action in creating these limits causing tuition and fees to skyrocket 150% (JLARC, 2013a, 37). The primary driver of these costs is auxiliary funds, or nonacademic funds and programs such as housing, dining, and intercollegiate athletics. Intercolligate athletics takes the spotlight as a major reason for huge fee increases. Because Virginia does not subsidize their athletic programs, students must fund a vast amount of these programs (JLARC, 2013b, 5). Increases in athletic programs have outpaced inflation, education and general spending as well as total institutional spending with Virginia’s 15 public colleges and universities spending nearly $6.1 million each from 2006-7 to 2011-12 on intercollegiate athletics (JLARC, 2013b, 23).

Conclusion

Virginia’s higher education system is one of the least affordable in the United States. Without proper funding per FTE student and adequate control of the board of visitors at each institution, tuition and fees will continue to skyrocket indefinitely. If Virginia wants to maintain a bachelors degree as the standard for middle class living, legislature must change their policies in order to aid students more and to prevent schools from raising tuition and fees to colossal levels. Attaining a college degree will no longer be accessible in a short number of years for most Americans. If Virginia’s policy on higher education does not change, it won’t be surprising if the only people able to afford a college education are upper class Americans.

Works Cited