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Opinion

A tuition freeze for the next academic year will have future repercussions

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This week, the Maryland Board of Regents voted again to freeze tuition levels, and Maryland residents attending state universities breathed a sigh of relief. Graduate and out-of-state students didn't fare quite so well—their tuition will increase in 2009. Although the freeze provides some much appreciated relief, this move hardly solves the underlying problems of rising tuition costs. In the next year, politicians and university officials need to develop ways to lock in affordability—and not just for in-state students.

Just four years ago, Maryland tuition ranked as the sixth most expensive in the country. As a result of four successive tuition freezes, it now ranks sixteenth on the list. Despite this encouraging progress, the fact remains that it is only temporary—the state cannot indefinitely continue to freeze tuition, for two reasons.

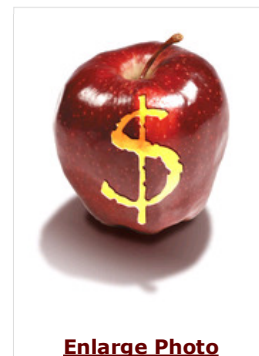
First, consider the fact that the increase in tuition for graduate and out-of-state students helps to offset state funds. As this group is asked to subsidize the cost of in-state tuition, potential students will likely go to other, cheaper schools. In fact, over the last five years, enrollment of out-of-state undergraduate students at UMBC has decreased, according to the UMBC Operating Budget Data. The authors note, "Since at least fall 2003, enrollment of out-of-state undergraduate students has been declining as out-of-state tuition has increased, affecting total tuition and fee revenues." As "the tuition and fee rate increased 33.8%, or \$4,426, since fall 2003, out-of-state enrollment declined 30.9%, or by 366 students." To put this in perspective, in 2003 out-of-state students comprised 12.4% of the student body. In 2008, they made up 8.6%. Out-of-state students are already reacting to higher rates (and, it seems likely, so will graduate students). This implies that relying on out-of-state tuition isn't sustainable and may even exacerbate the problem as students enroll elsewhere.

Second, in order to ensure that costs don't rise too rapidly once the freeze ends, the state is planning to...well, we're not sure what. Governor O'Malley says, "That's our hope that the economy will start to rebound." Well, that's our hope, too, but hope equals neither a guarantee of success nor a coherent approach to the problem. Not only that, but even if the economy does begin recovery this year, most economists project much slower growth. 2006 this is not.

So how could the state lower education costs in the long run? One answer might be for the state to remove itself completely from the business of higher education. Several recent economic studies make a persuasive case that state funding actually helps drive up the cost of tuition. As Neal McCluskey writes, "A student will 'purchase' education at a price he can afford." The money provided to him by the government, "enables him to pay a higher tuition." Thus, "In the aggregate, multiple billions in student aid artificially inflate demand—and average tuition—as students who might not have gone to college do, and others attend more expensive institutions than they otherwise would have." In other words, government aid allows more students to afford more education. With heightened demand, schools raise their costs in order to accommodate the extra demand, and the dollars that come with it. This suggests that over the long haul, if the state really wants to bring down the cost of higher education, it will stop subsidizing it.

It is also interesting to note that, according to Ohio University's Dr. Richard Vedder, "the increase in access to higher education in America largely came before massive federal involvement in student financial aid programs." He compares enrollment in 1900 (23 out of every 1,000 Americans) to that in 1970 (324 out of every 1,000). Even accounting for the affects of the GI Bill, "total federal financial aid programs, including grants and loans, amounted to less than \$1.6 billion, or less than \$200 per student enrolled." If this large increase occurred without major federal assistance, that raises the question of how important state aid really is to ensuring accessible education.

Regardless of the particular solution, the fact remains that the tuition freeze—although well meaning—is largely symbolic until the state and schools come up with a way to ensure that education remains affordable in the long-term.



[Enlarge Photo](#)

Poll

What is your least favorite part about this time of the semester?

- The rain.
- The heavy load of pre-exam schoolwork.
- That exams are approaching.
- The school year is coming to an end, and I'm already beginning to miss UMBC.

Last Week's Poll

What did you think of the Girl Talk concert?

- It was amazing and definitely worth the wait! (23)
- So-So, though I did like the toilet paper trick (18)
- I did not enjoy it (15)
- I did not attend (73)

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