

Letter to Editor

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Public Higher Education Makes a Difference in the Lives of Individuals and Communities

In a recent presentation, UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Divina Grossman stated, and I concur, that "*for 21st century communities to thrive, they need strong foundations resting upon the cornerstones of education, innovation, generosity, and civic engagement.*" Not coincidentally, my experience leads me to believe that those same attributes help shape the success of individuals and family units.

My journey is not unlike many youth in our region. I grew up in Fall River, the son of a carpenter, the tenth of eleven children, and the first to go to college. My older brothers became skilled tradesmen and my sisters worked as bank tellers and nursing assistants. My parents instilled in us important and lasting values - hard work, honesty, and generosity. These have shaped almost every decision that I've made. Perhaps the toughest and best decision I made was to go to college. It was made more difficult by our lack of family experience with higher education and because I had to pay for it myself.

I believe that many families in the Southcoast view education as an expense when it is in fact an investment. Both expenses and investments involve cash outlays, but good investments return that initial outlay and more. Higher education is a good investment in further developing the values I mentioned earlier. It is a great investment financially for both the community and the individual student. Let's take the case of UMass Dartmouth.

Last year, President Obama's Higher Education Honor Roll recognized UMass Dartmouth among the top 12 institutions in the country for civic engagement. The Washington Monthly has since affirmed that ranking with a top ranking of their own. Our students contributed nearly 200,000 hours of service to the community. By nationally recognized standards, this service equated to over \$5 million of value to the community. The students' service is delivered in many forms – tutoring young people in schools and at Boys and Girls Clubs, assisting senior citizens with their taxes, or studying traffic patterns to reduce vehicular congestion. In this process, our students not only apply their academic skills, but build a network and learn the value of hard work and generosity through civic engagement. It is a recipe for success - a win-win!

Student efforts have happened at the same time that we have asked them to pay a higher share for their education. For a number of years now we have been facing declining state support and increasing student charges. There is an emerging argument out there that perhaps higher education is not worth the investment anymore...that it has just gotten too expensive. I know that here on the SouthCoast we know better. We know that low educational attainment levels have a negative impact on our economy and the overall quality of life. Conversely, we also know that the creation of a learning culture – from pre-K to gray – will spark hope and aspiration. Often we hear about the cost of going to college, but do not quantify the cost of not going to college.

The Brookings Institute recently released a report with the following key findings:

1. The value of a college degree continues to enhance lifelong earnings. In the 1980s, young college graduates (like me) earned about \$4,000 more per year in inflation-adjusted dollars than high school graduates. That figure is \$12,000 today!
2. College remains a critical employment factor. A college graduate is almost 20 percentage points more likely to be employed than someone with only a high school diploma (including trade school diplomas like my brothers). This is the largest such employment gap in our nation's history.
3. Compared to other investments such as real estate, stocks, bonds, and the like, a college education has a higher annual return on investment (ROI). Here is how they stack up:
 - College degree - 15 percent annual ROI
 - Stocks – 6.8 percent
 - Gold – 2.3 percent
 - Government bonds – 2.2 percent
 - Housing - 0.4 percent

Though the price of college is increasing, the price of NOT going to college is rising even faster. The average cost of 4 years of college was \$56,000 in the 1980s and is now \$82,000 – about a 50 percent increase. However, the difference in lifetime earnings for a college graduate vs. a high school graduate has increased from \$260,000 to \$470,000 during that same period – about 75 percent higher.

So, we have some serious questions to answer in the years ahead – as individuals, as a community, as a Commonwealth, and as a nation. And as so many salient questions do, the answers will be determined by our values. Do we believe in the power of education to transform the lives of individuals and communities? I do because it has transformed my life and further reinforced those important values of hard work, honesty, and generosity taught me by my parents. Investing in public higher education pays off for individuals and communities!