Jul-1985

Guest Opinion: Massachusetts State Colleges: Keeping Pace

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Recommended Citation

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For knowledge too, is itself a power," wrote Sir Francis Bacon in the 17th century, and today's economists would certainly agree. We all recognize that America is in the grip of an Educational-Technological-Informational revolution that has provoked serious economic upheaval in some parts of the country but has brought to Massachusetts unprecedented growth and prosperity. Whole new industries have been spawned as a result of this revolution, including the burgeoning information industry. More than before, knowledge has become merchandise and Massachusetts -- with one of the nation's largest concentrations of higher education institutions -- is fortunately well-stocked in that commodity.

We live in the midst of a society that is experiencing profound change:
- In the 1950's, fully 65% of the American workforce was engaged in manufacturing occupations. Today that figure is just 12%. In 1950, only about 17% of us worked in what could be called "information-related jobs." Today, more than 70% of us do.
- During the 1970's, according to an MIT study, more than 19 million new jobs were created, the most in our history. Only 5% were in manufacturing.
- Today nearly 27 million Americans age twenty-five and older are college-educated, up almost 4% since 1980. Between 1960 and 1980 the number of persons in the U.S. labor force with four or more years of college increased by 200%.

Clearly, a transition of enormous impact has already begun. As a society we are shifting from an industrial base (when control of raw materials and physical human toil were the basis of power) to an information age. Here the control and distribution of knowledge are central to economic fulfillment, with all the benefits such fulfillment bestows upon citizens and institutions. "In the current decade," reports a study commissioned by the U.S. Congress, "more than half of our gross national product is based on the development, storage, transfer, and use of information."

From first-hand experience, we in Massachusetts understand the implications of this revolution. During the past ten years we have lived at its edge. As Governor Michael Dukakis pointed out last January in his annual "State of the State Address," ten years ago the Commonwealth was beset by a plethora of economic woes, including one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation. The mills and factories were then Massachusetts' prime industries. As the demand for their goods and services declined, so did the state's financial prospects. But there was one significant resource the Commonwealth possessed that many other states did not: an extensive network of quality higher education institutions. Around these colleges and universities began to gather a flourishing community of electronics, high-technology, and information-based companies which were being attracted by the availability of people with skills, training, and experience -- in short, an educated workforce, a vital building block to their growing enterprises. It was an ideal match, and soon Massachusetts was making progress once again.

Today our unemployment rate is the lowest of any industrial state in the nation. More jobs were created here in 1984 than in any year since the end of World War II. In the past two years alone, 40,000 new businesses have opened in Massachusetts.

A number of other states have attempted to emulate the Commonwealth's success, and the ones doing well at it (such as California, Texas, and North Carolina) have strong networks of quality colleges and universities which are the links to the new industries. The competition to attract such companies is understandably intense among individual states and regions of the country, and since we know that Massachusetts' robust economy is rooted to a significant degree in its higher education system, we must be persistent and aggressive in our support of that system's continued vitality.

Massachusetts is in an enviable position because of its abundance of college and universities in both the public and private sectors which contribute to a national and international reputation for educational excellence. And because our public colleges enroll the majority of Massachusetts residents who attend college, the state has a special obligation to guarantee the continuing health, strength, and accessibility of this critical segment. It was for this reason that a year ago Governor Dukakis strenuously -- and successfully -- opposed tuition hikes which had the potential to deny to large numbers of students access to the quality learning opportunities available in the state colleges and universities. Moreover, he insisted on the creation of a tuition policy which insures that future adjustments are based on firm guidelines that exempt the process from any but precisely defined economic considerations.

Indeed, if we are to seek an example which demonstrates how institutions adapt to meet the evolving needs of society, the state colleges in Massachusetts provide a superior model. The oldest branch of our public higher education system, the state colleges were originally conceived in 1839 as single purpose schools to produce teachers.
who were professionally trained for the Commonwealth. Beginning in 1960, the state colleges, in response to perceived needs, began the transition to multi-purpose, liberal arts institutions which today emphasize a twin commitment to the arts and sciences and career preparation in more than one hundred different fields.

Approximately 33,000 full-time students, and nearly 2,000 full-time faculty, are now at work in our state colleges. There are more than 100,000 living alumni of these colleges, and 75% live and work in Massachusetts, contributing their talent and energy to their careers and their communities.

Each of us associated with the state colleges -- as alumni, faculty, students, staff, or friends -- should take great pride in the manner in which these nine colleges have expanded their curricula while preserving the traditions of academic excellence. If we agree with the "idea of the college" advocated by Cardinal John Henry Newman (detailed and expanded upon by Professor Edward James in an earlier issue of this magazine) that education is ultimately more useful and relevant than any specific product, then we should applaud the state colleges for their ongoing commitment to Liberal Arts studies as a foundation for all baccalaureate programs. Preparing men and women to understand and deal effectively with ethical, moral, and social issues is at least as important as any occupational preparation that higher education may provide. But more to the point, as Joel P. Smith, former president of Stanford University says, "a liberal education is practical for the long term; it works and it lasts."

Those of us in the fields of government or education with ties to the state colleges particularly are constrained to understand, both philosophically and pragmatically, the special and unique functions of this segment of public higher education, and to promote at every opportunity the important mission of these institutions. With next year's in-state tuition set at $936.00, and with these colleges delivering a well-rounded quality education thanks to a corps of dedicated teacher-scholars, there is much to cheer about.

"If you do not think about the future," said author John Galsworthy, "you cannot have one." The state colleges are a key part of the Commonwealth's investment in its future. They have stood the tests of time, transition, and public service, and they have done so remarkably well.

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Norfolk To Boston

She is too warm in her clothes
with menses, excitement,
and the Norfolk sunshine.

Two gray heron ply
between the runway
and the creek
that curls away
like pared rind.

She eyes the blue lights
beading the runway
and catches at the sapphire
on her throat, turning
with thumb and finger
the shape of a memory
to points of new fire.

"The temperature in Boston
is thirty-two degrees."
The captain's voice is sanguine,
pleasantly southern.

She secures her seat belt
and lets go of the leaving--
leaves the city blocked out below,
its spaces apportioned,
finished as a dead thing.

The bay is quiet as an iced
northern pond, colored mauve
in the aurora of morning.

The blue jet flare of an engine
flickers like St. Elmo's fire,
reflected off the water's skin.

Contours of coast roll out
like moist pie crust--
thin, thinner, wafering off
into the sea.

This climbing is never routine for her--
the adieu to what is down there
for an hour or forever.

The god that cabins the body
in steel uncages something.
She is free on an island
in this waste, aware of energy
and the peace of displacement.

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Faye George Hennebury