

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
HEARING

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Testimony of Robert Zemsky

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee—I want to begin by thanking you for this opportunity to testify about the role tuition and financial aid plays in helping to determine who attends college in Pennsylvania. As you know, I was the principal author of the 2006 study *A Rising Tide* that was jointly published by The Education Policy and Leadership Center and The Learning Alliance for Higher Education. I am the chair of The Learning Alliance and a long time member of the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania. I was also a member of the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education best known as the Spellings Commission.

In *A Rising Tide* we asked many of the same questions that you are now addressing:

- Who is being served by higher education in the Commonwealth—and, just as importantly, who is not being served?
- Could we account for differing higher education participation rates among different populations?

And most directly,

- Was a Pennsylvania college education still affordable? How many potential students had been shut out of the market because the prices colleges and universities charged were too high?

*A Rising Tide: The Current State of Higher Education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* reported the answers we developed after a year of exploring a wide variety of data bases, conducting a special telephone poll, and interviewing a variety of Pennsylvanians concerned with the quality of higher education across the Commonwealth.

Let me start with Educational Attainment and Participation. The good news is that Pennsylvanians across the board have enjoyed increasing access to higher education. More start college, earn a baccalaureate degree, and continue their higher educations through graduate and professional study.

The bad news is that the Commonwealth has made little, if any, progress in closing the gap between majority and minority attainment. Just as disappointing is the gap between the prospects of young people schooled in rural as opposed to urban and suburban communities.

Some of what our analysis taught us has long been known. More affluent communities are more likely to send their children to college; poor job prospects encourage high school graduates to seek out more education; better performing school districts are more likely to send their high school graduates to college. Less well understood is just how often young adults in rural communities remain at significant disadvantage, in part because they are more likely to attend a poorly performing school, in part because college attendance is not as strong a tradition in their communities, and in part because greater distances to two-year colleges mean they are less likely to have ready access to the low-risk higher education portals that community colleges provide.

Poorly performing schools have the same negative impact on college enrollments. The gap between college attendance rates among non-rural school districts along the poor-performance/better-performance divide is actually greater than the same gap for rural school districts. Our hope is that our analysis will focus new attention on the importance of secondary school quality and the ability of these schools to graduate college- and work-ready students as a means of reducing persistent gaps in educational participation and attainment.

It was from this perspective that we examined the importance of price. From our polling we learned that most young adults in Pennsylvania found their higher education options to be expensive, but still affordable. Indeed, the cost of attendance was only one of many factors that impacted higher education participation rates for most young adults.

Still, there is a sizeable group of Pennsylvanians—4 to 8 percent of young adults who are disproportionately African American, Hispanic American, or from rural communities—who believe the high tuitions charged by Pennsylvania institutions preclude them from starting college. Helping this specific group of potential students will require carefully targeted initiatives, rather than any broad-brush attempt to lower the cost of college for everyone.

Let me be more specific about the question of affordability. I am aware that a large number of commentators have argued that rising cost of attending one of this nation's colleges or universities is a clear and present danger or, as *Measuring Up 2004* concluded, "The vast majority of states have failed to keep college affordable for most families."

I am not so sure. In part, my doubts are conceptual. When something is unaffordable it means it won't be purchased. Health insurance—and with it access to health care—is now truly unaffordable for a frighteningly large and growing number of American families. We know that to be the case because of the increasing number of American families who do not have health insurance. That seemingly is not the case for American higher education in general and Pennsylvania higher education in particular, given that in most years enrollments have continued to rise even as have the prices students are expected to pay and the benefits they expect to garner from their college educations.

Market researchers often talk about affordability in terms of the would-be customer's "willingness to pay" for a specific product and that same customer's "ability to pay." Thus far most American families and most students have shown both an ability and a willingness to pay the prices colleges and universities charge. Indeed, most purchasers of higher education have, over the last decade, been shopping up, consistently choosing higher-priced over lower-priced options. The baccalaureate institutions that are hurting for enrollments are, for the most part, those with the lowest tuitions.

It is a curious conundrum. Take, for example, the case of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which *Measuring Up* awarded a C for Affordability in 2000, a D in 2002, and an F in 2004 and 2006. On the other hand, Pennsylvania earned an A in Completion, meaning that Pennsylvania institutions do very well in terms of retention and their capacity to graduate students within six years of matriculation—and a B for participation, indicating that "compared with other states, the likelihood of Pennsylvania 9th graders enrolling in college within four years is high." Pennsylvania's high tuitions were less of a barrier to enrollment and persistence than the Commonwealth's F on Affordability would have us believe.

There's more. The polling we commissioned for our study of higher education across the Commonwealth was designed and administered by Berwood Yost of the Floyd Institute for Public Policy at Franklin and Marshall College, in collaboration with his colleague, Terry Madonna, the Director of the Keystone Poll. The survey, conducted in the fall of 2005, queried 519 Pennsylvanians, evenly divided between men and women and roughly representative of the Commonwealth's geography. Their sample was 12% African American and 9% Hispanic—again roughly what one would expect of a random sample of Pennsylvanians. The sample also included a substantial number of respondents who had not attended a college or university—roughly divided between those who said they had never intended to seek a college education and those who said they had wanted to but, for a variety of reasons, had not.

What the survey found attests to the confusions that are becoming an integral part of the affordability discussion. Eighty-six percent of the sample agreed with the statement "Regardless of the cost, tuition at Pennsylvania's public universities is a worthwhile investment." Just 9% disagreed. Sixty-three percent agreed with the statement, "The cost to get an education at one of Pennsylvania's public universities is affordable." Twenty-five percent disagreed, and 12% said they didn't know.

One question on the survey asked whether costs had determined the choice of a college or university. Three-quarters of the respondents who either had attended or were currently attending an institution of higher education reported that there was not a college or university that they had wanted to attend but did not "because it cost too much." Yost and Madonna concluded:

The secondary role of costs to college attendees is also evident in the reasons they provide for choosing a college to attend. Total cost is less often mentioned as the most important reason for attending a specific college than are factors like location and the availability of specific majors.

What I have concluded from these explorations is that higher education across

Pennsylvania is largely a success story. The task at hand is to learn how to use the forces of the market and the Commonwealth's limited funds to broaden access to underserved regions and populations; to continue to strengthen the teaching of math, science, computing, and engineering at both the collegiate and secondary school levels; and to achieve a better alignment among the Commonwealth's rich variety of postsecondary programs.

Thank you.

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