

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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The New England Board of Higher Education is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to promote greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England.

NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

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EDITOR'S MEMO

As Maine Goes ...

Here's a trend: even as New England college enrollment nears a record 850,000, students from lower-income families continue to get knocked off the road to higher education at every turn.

First, they graduate from high school at lower rates than their higher-income counterparts. Then, those who do finish high school go on to college at lower rates. Finally, those who go to college are far less likely to complete degrees, due largely to inadequate preparation, competing claims on their time (read: work) and financial need.

All told, just 5 percent of U.S. students from the bottom quartile of family income earn bachelor's degrees by age 24, compared with 51 percent of students from the top quartile, according to Pell Institute Senior Scholar Thomas G. Mortenson.

There are plenty of reasons to believe the inequity is worsening. Squeezed by state budget cuts, public universities—once gateways for a state's neediest students—have taken to wooing high-income, out-of-state students who can pay more. And the impulse to award scholarships based not on financial need but on test scores threatens to divert scarce student aid funds to wealthy suburbanites who would go to college anyway. College prices have actually *decreased* as a share of that group's income.

In Maine, where six of every 10 ninth-graders eventually swerve off the road to a college degree, and shuttered mills attest to a shifting economy, there is a growing realization that low educational attainment could bring economic and civic disaster. A group of 33 education, business, government and community leaders have been meeting for the past year to confront the challenge head-on. Later this spring, their Maine Compact for Higher Education will propose a set of bold strategies aimed at preparing 39,500 additional degree-holders in Maine by 2019. (*Full disclosure: I helped write the compact's action plan.*)

The first strategy likely to emerge from the Maine compact is a special state scholarship program eliminating *all* unmet need and *all* education loans for eligible students from low-income households. Currently, even low-income students whose "expected family contribution" is determined by the federal government to be zero can expect aid packages several thousand dollars short of a proverbial full boat. And mounting war bills and tax cuts make any new federal spending on need-based student aid unlikely. What is likely to come out of Washington instead is a reallocation of federal Work Study funds and other campus-based aid away from New England to politically ascendant Sunbelt states—a change that could cost Maine half its federal campus-based aid dollars.

Another proposal will encourage every Maine high school to offer students a spectrum of "early college" experiences. These may range from Advanced Placement (AP) classes to single courses at a local community college to opportunities to graduate from high school with significant college credit—even a full associate degree. Importantly, this initiative focuses on the student "in the back of the class" who may see college as unattainable.

Two other likely strategies will focus on adults. Just as high school students need early college experiences to stay on the road to college, adults need transition programs to turn night courses, skills upgrading or GED programs into degree programs. So, the compact will promote pathways to college for adults who want to earn a degree but are underprepared for college work. Another strategy will help Maine employers devise forward-looking education policies for adult workers and provide a state tax credit for employers who help pay employees' tuition.

The compact and its partners also plan to target editorial pages, high school guidance offices and community meetings with what is, sad to say, a revolutionary message: a college education is the "Right and Responsibility" of all Maine residents.

Keep an eye on Augusta. As Maine goes, so may go New England.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.