

TUITION RELIEF ACT HEARING
TESTIMONY OF DR. ARTHUR L. SCOTT
PRESIDENT, NORTHAMPTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the proposed Tuition Relief Act. My name is Art Scott and I am currently the president of Northampton Community College, where I have spent the past thirty four years of my professional career. During that time period, I have developed a strong passion for providing accessible, affordable higher education, a belief in the transformative value of that education and an unwavering commitment to the notion that, as a nation, we need to shift the dialog away from access to higher education being viewed as a personal benefit to a conversation that acknowledges that access to education is critical to our nation's well being.

A report released this month by the Brookings Institute entitled "Transforming America's Community Colleges: A Federal Policy Proposal to Expand Opportunity and Promote Economic Prosperity," asserts that "the link between national educational attainment and national economic well-being has never been clearer. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, countries with higher rates of school enrollment have achieved higher levels of per capita income." President Obama recently called for a new national goal that, "by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the

world.” President Obama made that call, the Brookings Institute study contends, to acknowledge a hard truth. “As a nation we have lost our more than century-long advantage in postsecondary education attainment and are at risk of falling farther behind. Stagnating educational achievement threatens our nation’s ability to meet critical workforce needs, ensure rising standards of living for future generations, and close the racial and economic gaps that for too long have marred our economy and democracy.”

At the current time, according to the Brookings report, America is no longer the most highly-educated nation in the world, with at least 10 other nations surpassing our educational attainment levels.

Will the proposed Tuition Relief Act change all that? No. But, I would argue, it’s a good start and we have to start somewhere.

Two years ago, Ralph Puerta, the president of the Saucon Valley School Board forwarded to me an article that was written by Tamim Ansary entitled, “What Community Colleges Mean to Democracy.” Mr. Ansary took on the issue of whether our country is drifting away from being a land of equal opportunity by pointing out that data show that a high achieving child from a poor family has less of a chance of graduating from college than a low achieving child from a wealthy family. Our society should never accept an uneven playing field when it comes to education. Educational opportunity for all should be a moral imperative in this country.

We all know that affordability is a critical factor in maximizing access to higher education. Yet the College Board's Rethinking Student Aid panel notes that community college students are allocated less financial aid than their four-year college counterparts and that the rules surrounding financial aid further limit its usefulness. That's an interesting public policy issue if, for no other fact, than annually community college enrollment is increasing at over twice the rate of that at four-year colleges. Northampton Community College is the fastest growing community college in Pennsylvania on a percentage basis for the past five years. Our enrollment has increased 82% since the fall of 2000. And the total number of minority students we serve has more than doubled since the fall of 2003, giving us the distinction of having the highest number and percentage of minority students in our region.

We are currently a participant in the Lumina Foundation's Achieve the Dream initiative, a project that requires us to take a very close look at graduation and persistence data by gender, race, ethnicity and socio-economic groupings. One of the interesting early findings coming out of the data review has to do with Pell Grant recipients. When we looked at persistence rates for all students in the 2003-04 academic year, we found that fall to spring retention rates were higher for Pell Grant recipients than for the general student population. Eighty-one percent of Pell Grant recipients were retained from fall to spring compared to a 68% retention rate for the entire student population. That increased retention rate held for fall of '03 to fall of '04 when Pell recipients were retained at 56% vs. a general retention rate of 48%.

Easing the financial burdens of students and their families allows them to focus on the important learning that needs to occur in college and hopefully, as the Achieve the Dream data would suggest, to persist at higher rates. That is my hope for the Tuition Relief program: that it will keep higher education accessible in these tough economic times, that students will persist in their dreams of a college education and that this Commonwealth will be better off because of it... since nearly 90% of community college and SSHE graduates stay in the state.

Measuring Up 2008, the National Report Card on Higher Education notes that students and their families in the lowest and lower middle income groups on average have to devote up to 44% of their annual income to attend community colleges even after receiving financial aid. Existing financial aid programs are not sufficient for community college students.

In this Commonwealth, at our 14 community colleges:

- 47.5% of full time students receive no financial aid
- 65% of part-time students receive no financial aid
- 12,640 students were dropped for non-payment this past fall semester.

Pennsylvania's community college students currently receive only 4.4% of the total value of all Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) grants or \$19 million compared to the \$91.5 million to the PASSHE universities, \$119.2 million to the state related and the \$159.7 million to private colleges and universities.

At Northampton Community College in 2007-08 only 32% of our student body received some form of financial aid. This past fall, of registered students, 16.2% were dropped for not being able to make payment on their tuition bills. More alarmingly, perhaps, the amount of loan indebtedness our students are taking on is growing exponentially. In 2007-08, 2091 students took out loans for \$6,700,000. One year and only a 3% tuition increase later, borrowing increased by 30%, while the number of students borrowing money actually increased by less than five percent.

The Tuition Relief Act will help address some of this imbalance by making it possible for more middle income students to receive aid, for part time students to receive grants, for those pursuing short-term skill based certificate programs to receive financial support and by establishing more reasonable application deadlines so that adult students are not penalized.

Last year, the College Board published a report entitled “Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America’s Middle Class.” The report begins with the following statement: “American community colleges are the nation’s overlooked asset. As the United States confronts the challenges of globalization, two-year institutions are indispensable to the American future. They are the Ellis Island of American higher education, the crossroads at which K-12 education meets colleges and universities, and the institutions that give many students the tools to navigate the modern world.”

Allow us to give students the tools to navigate the modern world by helping them attend either a community college or a SSHE institution through this Tuition Relief program.

The Tuition Relief Program will help thousands of students who make the cost-conscious decision to attend a community college or state-owned university, but it will not deny aid to students who make other choices. Financial assistance will continue to be available to them through private scholarship funds and through PHEAA.

There's a statement in the Brookings Institute report that really resonates with me because it explains the frustration I have sometimes felt over the past six years as president when dealing with the political situation in the Commonwealth. I'd like to quote it for you now: "Lacking vocal advocates, powerful roles in state governance structures, and often cast solely as job-training providers, the two-year sector is often the loser in battles waged over scarce resources, especially when competing with flagship universities." I'm asking you not to let us lose this battle. Our Commonwealth and our country cannot afford that kind of loss. Thank you.