

UVI Free Tuition Program Reaches Breaking Point With \$500K Deficit and \$3M Annual Price Tag

Dr. Safiya George said UVI needs \$2.6 million for Spring, Summer and Fall 2026 awards and \$3 million each academic year thereafter, warning a suspension would be “catastrophic” as the fund faces a \$500,000 deficit and negative balance.

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The University of the Virgin Islands’ Free Tuition Fund program is currently in “jeopardy status” as inadequate funding and a \$500,000 deficit threaten its continuity.

The sobering update was shared by Dr. Safiya George, the university’s president, during Wednesday’s meeting of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

In 2019, the program's first year, UVI granted free tuition support to 170 students at a cost of \$636,739. In 2024, the program was expanded to serve not just full-time, on-campus students, but also part-time and online scholars. In the 2024-2025 academic year, UVI supported 548 students at a cost of \$2.39 million.

In the current academic year, 445 students were supported during the fall semester totaling \$1.16 million.

Expanded eligibility and increased student participation has fueled the program's growth, prompting the need for even greater injections of funds. But according to George, "additional funding requested for fiscal year 2026 was not approved." She warned lawmakers that without additional funding, both the program and students' educational trajectories will be placed at "substantial risk." Currently, the fund has a "negative balance and no remaining funds available."

Without the requested funding, UVI will be forced to issue correspondence to students informing them of the inability to continue the free tuition program.

Now operating under "increasing financial strain", George explained that UVI is "closely evaluating the sustainability of the program in its current form."

"There is a strong possibility that new awards may need to be temporarily suspended if funding is not received in a timely manner," George noted. "We need to give this communication to students like today," she told Senator Carla Joseph.

Discussions with key entities like the Office of Management and Budget are ongoing, as well as meetings with the chairman of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance. To date, only verbal commitments have been received, but UVI is at a critical juncture that requires immediate intervention. According to George, UVI requires \$2.6 million to support Spring 2026, Summer 2026, and Fall 2026 student awards. Moving forward, UVI will need \$3 million each academic year to sustain the program.

UVI is now relying on "continued partnership with the Legislature to identify a path forward that sustains this critical program while ensuring the university's financial stability," said George.

Senator Joseph has agreed that "we must see how we can support you," noting that UVI is the only institution of higher learning in the territory.

"We continue to be in a quagmire," lamented Senator Novelle Francis, who chairs the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance. He shared that several semi-autonomous agencies are currently "financially challenged", forcing the GVI to reassess what spending obligations are prioritized.

Notwithstanding, Senator Francis assured George that he has been discussing the issue with the Office of Management and Budget. "We want to ensure that we continue to support our free tuition, and having that suspended is not an option," he stated.

For Senator Kurt Vialet, who chairs the Education Committee, the current challenges within the free tuition program signal the need for a potentially uncomfortable conversation.

"We gotta be careful when we are developing this literal mentality that every single aspect is going to be free. It's unaffordable," he declared. His remarks were based on the notion that free room and board and free books should be offered on top of free tuition. "When you have skin in a

book in the game, you study harder, or you do better,” he stated.

Senator Vialet warned that if the Legislature does not regulate the free tuition program, it will eventually “explode.” He maintained that the program should only be offered to full-time, undergraduate students.

“Where are we going to find [an] additional two point something million dollars when we owe everybody,” Senator Vialet bemoaned.

“It's not a popular conversation, but it's a realistic conversation,” he stated.

With UVI awaiting the support of the government to keep the program afloat, George warned that the impact of a suspended program would be “catastrophic.” Not only could enrollment numbers decline, but the pipeline of educated professionals destined for the local workforce could dry up.

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