

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Historic Moment For USVI, Mapp Announces Free Tuition For College-Bound Students

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What was expected to be a press conference dominated by information relative to [Tropical Storm Isaac making its way to the Leeward Islands](#), was overshadowed by a historic announcement from Governor Kenneth Mapp and University of the Virgin Islands President Dr. David Hall on Tuesday morning: free tuition for Virgin Islands students seeking higher education from UVI, beginning in Fall 2019.

"Today, in conjunction with the University of the Virgin Islands, I am sending a bill to the Virgin Islands Legislature entitled the Virgin Islands Workforce Development Scholarship Program," the governor announced at Government House on St. Croix.

"I am honored that the Virgin Islands has arrived at a place where the University of the Virgin Islands and one of its [Board of Trustees members] in particular, [Oran Roebuck Bowry](#), who has been a main champion on the Board of Trustees on finding a pathway that we could provide a four-year college education free of charge to every high school graduate in the U.S. Virgin Islands, whether it's from private, public or parochial schools."

According to the governor and Mr. Hall, the cost to the government annually for up 1,700 high school graduates will be \$3 million. Asked why wasn't this done earlier, the UVI president said it was a vision of his and others at UVI for quite some time, but it had to be ensured that the institution was receiving enough endowments and other forms of private funding to ease the financial burden on the government.



UVI President David Hall, left, and Governor Kenneth Mapp

"We had to get to a point where what we would be asking the government to absorb was a more reasonable number, and that's because we have had private individuals, especially the [RT Park](#) -- every company that comes in now has to commit to one or more scholarships -- and so overtime I saw us getting closer and closer to a point where I thought I could go to the governor and Legislature and say the gap is not \$5 million no more, the gap is \$3 million," Mr. Hall said.

To scholarship program has roughly nine qualification requirements, according to the governor:

- Applicant must be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.
- A bonafide resident domiciled in the U.S. Virgin Islands at the time he or she files an application for admission to UVI.
- Have a combined family household per capita income not exceeding \$35,000 per family member.
- Be a graduate of a U.S. Virgin Islands public, private or parochial school, adult continuing education program, or a certified homeschool program in the U.S. Virgin Islands. (If a high school student was displaced due to a natural disaster and graduated from a school outside the territory, who maintains their residency in the U.S. Virgin Islands, this student shall be eligible for the scholarship program.)
- The applicant must have applied for and completed a free application for federal student aid, and have accepted all available federal financial awards and all other means of financial aid and grants, except loans.
- An applicant must apply for full-time admission to UVI no later than February 1 of the calendar year in which the student wishes to enroll, and must make a deposit indicating intention to attend by May 1 of that year.
- Applicant must attend UVI on a full-time matriculated basis, meaning a minimum of twelve credit hours per semester.
- Applicant must remain in good academic standing based on existing academic rules at UVI, and must maintain a grade point average of not less than 2.0.
- Applicant must agree to provide not less than 100 hours of community service per semester in a nonprofit community organization, or in a department or agency within the Government of the Virgin Islands as determined by UVI through a work-study intern program or community service sites as determined by UVI.

The program must be used for students obtaining their first degree, which can be an associate's or bachelor's degree, or both, but only up to 122 credit hours, or, in exceptional cases, 132 credit hours, Mr. Mapp said. The scholarship recipient shall matriculate (be enrolled) at UVI no later than the full semester one year after accepting the scholarship.

"This bill will be sent to the Legislature in driving and improving our workforce in the territory," Mr. Mapp said, "giving our children access to a college education without taking on a student loan that can equate to the value of a mortgage."

The program is not limited to new high school graduates, according to the governor. It is for graduates of any year.

If approved by the Legislature, the U.S. Virgin Islands will join eight states that provide free tuition for an associate's degree, and only two states that offer free college tuition for a bachelor's degree. "We will be the third jurisdiction in the U.S. to provide free tuition for a bachelor's degree, and the first Historically Black College (H.B.C.U.) to do this," Governor Mapp said.



The University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix Campus

The U.S. Virgin Islands will also be the first U.S. territory to offer free tuition for college to its residents if the measure is approved by the Senate.

Relative to how the government would pay for the program, the governor said there has been an increase in the Internal Revenue Matching Fund, known as the rum cover-over funds, which he intends to put towards the free tuition program. The G.V.I. receives from the federal government taxes on USVI rums sold on the mainland every year. The sum hovers between \$225 million to \$250 million, most of which go towards paying the territory's bondholders. Of the remaining funds, Diageo USVI and Cruzan Rum receive the lion's share for promotional fees and molasses subsidies, as per the government's agreement with the companies.

This year, the governor said the rum-cover funds to be received from the federal government jumped from \$227 million to \$251 million. He said the rum revenues to the general fund this year will be \$24 million, \$20 million of which will go to the rum companies, while the \$4 million will remain with the local government.

"Of that \$4 million we're going to set aside \$3 million annually and place it under the administration of the commissioner of Finance, and the University of the Virgin Islands will then make its drawdowns from that fund based on the number of students that it accepts into the program," Mr. Mapp said.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the amounts remitted to the territory annually in rum cover-over taxes fluctuate, therefore using it as a funding source may be of concern.

While tuition will be free, there will be other costs associated with seeking higher education, according to Mr. Hall. He said students will still need to purchase their books, and if they desire to stay on campus, there are costs associated with that as well. Mr. Hall said he would continue working with private firms to build on the endowments being provided to UVI, and work towards more permanent relationships with companies that give to the university with not strict commitment.

The funding mechanism of the program depends in part on the continued growth of the USVI economy, Mr. Hall said. The more businesses that setup shop in the territory, the more students the program will be able to cover, he said.