

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Tuition-Free College Measure Stalls In Senate; Fall 2019 Students May Need To Pay To Attend UVI As Time Runs Out

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When Governor Kenneth Mapp announced on September 11 that the University of the Virgin Islands, from Fall 2019, would be a tuition-free institution following extensive work from university officials -- including expansive research on how the initiative would be funded -- Virgin Islanders near and far, among them many millennials with no means of paying for college, were elated.

But an announcement that once united the territory has seemingly been given zero attention by the 32nd Legislature, even as the Senate is well aware of its time-sensitive

nature.

Following [an interview with The Consortium a month ago](#), Mr. Mapp explained how the free tuition measure came about. He said UVI had been working for years on the plan, a large part of which included ideas to use private and public funding to accommodate the thousands of students expected to participate overtime. The governor said he was approached by Oran Bowry, senior vice president and region manager at Banco Popular, who also serves on the UVI board, stating that the university had finally come up with a comprehensive plan as to how the proposal would work. Essentially, if the local government could provide \$3 million annually, then all students attending UVI, beginning from Fall 2019, would attend free of charge.

The government had just received \$251 million from the U.S. Department of Interior in rum cover-over payments for the estimated FY 2019 rum tax collections. The governor identified the \$3 million needed to fund the free tuition program from the rum tax remittance, worked on a bill, and [immediately called a press conference](#) to make the announcement.

The reaction from Virgin Islanders was mostly euphoric, and the announcement became The Consortium's most read article in September. Governor Mapp sent the bill to the 32nd Legislature the same day.

But excitement once associated with the bill has been sapped, and the measure has sat languishing in the Senate, and has yet to be placed on an agenda to be heard. Further diminishing hope, the Senate, it is said, will basically be closed through December as senators head to the campaign trail ahead of November 6 seeking votes. The agenda-less weeks ahead of an election has been a tradition of Senate.

In light of the measure's apparent stalling, UVI President David Hall [wrote a letter](#) addressed to all 32nd Legislature lawmakers, requesting that the measure be given an opportunity to be heard. Calls placed on Monday to Myron Jackson, the Senate president who sets the agenda, were not returned at time of writing.

"We are writing today to request your support for moving forward with the Senate's deliberation of the free tuition bills that have been submitted to the Senate. It is imperative that this matter is addressed soon if it is to have any impact on those students and individuals who hope to attend college in the Fall of 2019," Mr. Hall wrote in the letter. "This innovative policy, once adopted, will make a tremendous difference in the future economic and educational development of the Virgin Islands. Presently the Virgin Islands lags behind all States in regards to the percentage of individuals with college degrees (11.4%). This reality stifles the economic development of the Territory and deprives businesses of the trained workforce that is necessary for them to remain and prosper. This policy will make higher education a priority for all Virgin Islanders and will send a resounding message that the government is willing to invest in their lives and their future."

The UVI president expressed the significance of the measure to the territory, and sought immediate action in an effort to assure that students hoping to attend UVI free in the Fall of next year, would not have their hopes dashed.

"The University hereby requests that a hearing of the Senate as a whole be convened immediately so that this important initiative can be addressed," Mr. Hall wrote. "We realize that there are two different bills on this topic that have been presented to the Senate, and this should serve as compelling evidence of how important it is for Legislature to move this matter forward.

"The University is willing to provide testimony and additional information once a Hearing is convened. This measure is one of the University's highest priorities and is included in the new strategic plan which should be approved by the Board this month."

According to people with knowledge of the bill's apparent stalling, Democrats, whose candidate Albert Bryan and running mate Tregenza Roach are seeking the governorship, were obstinate in their stance not to have the measure heard before the Nov. 6, not wanting to give Mr. Mapp credit weeks before a major election. They also contend that Mr. Roach's free college bill was first introduced to the Senate a number of years ago, which gives the senator authorship of the measure and hence the decision to bring it to the floor, or hold it.

Yet proponents of the measure have argued that the two bills could be merged, bringing both measures' strong points into one legislation so that free tuition could become a reality.

Speaking during a [Virgin Islands Political Consortium interview in September](#), Mr. Bryan said he would "absolutely" encourage his running mate Tregenza Roach to block the governor's measure. According to a Bryan-Roach campaign release issued following the governor's announcement, Mr. Roach first introduced Bill No. 30-0031, which seeks to create what is called the Virgin Islands Fund for Higher Education, in March 2013.

Yet, UVI officials see the free education tuition plan as too important to be delayed.

"It is rare when a proposed legislation already has the support of Senators and the Governor, and a funding source has been identified," Mr. Hall wrote. "In a recent election poll conducted by the University, 64% of those polled were in favor of the Free Tuition Policy and only 14% opposed. Thus, there is widespread community support for this policy as well."