

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senator Roach Will Reintroduce His Free College Tuition Bill Next Week

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Ernice Gilbert **October 19, 2018**



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Senator Tregenza Roach will reintroduce his free college tuition legislation next week, even as Governor Kenneth Mapp [has called a special session](#) to bring his own, [similar measure](#) to the Senate floor. The governor cited a lack of action in the Legislature and the time-sensitive nature of the bill as the reasons for the special session. University of the Virgin Islands President David Hall said immediate action was needed if Fall 2019 students were to benefit from the free tuition initiative.

The governor's action in calling a special session came hours after Mr. Roach told The Consortium that he would attempt to bring the measure to the floor next week. However, VI Consortium had yet to publish Mr. Roach's comments when Mr. Mapp called the special session.

Now, there's a quandary in the heat of a general election that's sure to garner heightened attention. When the Senate meets on October 26, lawmakers will decide whether to override Mr. Roach's authorship and preempt his free college tuition bill and instead go with that of the governor's. Or, senators could reject the governor's measure and move forward with their colleague's work, which was first introduced in 2013.

"The Senate will have to decide," Mr. Roach, a lieutenant governor candidate with Albert Bryan, told this publication Friday morning.

But how did we arrive to this point? Governor Mapp, with a funding source for a free college tuition measure that was in part forged by UVI officials, chief among them UVI board member Oran Bowry, announced what was deemed a landmark achievement on September 11 -- the same day Mr. Mapp forwarded the measure to the Senate. Once at the Senate, Myron Jackson, president of the 32nd Legislature, said he did his part by sending the bill to legal counsel, which then determined that Mr. Roach had authorship of the bill. Further, Mr. Jackson said, legal counsel relayed that Mr. Roach had preempted the governor, but a date had yet to be set that would see the initiative being heard on the Senate floor. Meanwhile, critical time passed and the window for Fall 2019 students to be the first to receive free college tuition was closing.

On Thursday, Mr. Roach told The Consortium that it was always his intention to introduce the measure to the Senate floor. However, he needed to make certain changes to the bill, and he needed to reconcile some ideas with Mr. Hall.

A meeting between Mr. Hall and Mr. Roach has been scheduled for Monday, where discussions on the bill will be had. Even so, Senator Roach said he was disappointed when he read Mr. Hall's letter, because both men had spoken about the importance of the bill, and had planned to talk further once Mr. Hall returned from a trip.

Mr. Roach said he was giving Mr. Hall the benefit of a doubt that he was not engaging himself in politics, but he said the president's actions speak for themselves. The senator then gave a timeline of events.

"The president raised the issue again in his budget hearing, and he mentioned that the university was thinking along the same lines, and he gave me credit on the record for introducing the idea into the Legislature. The next thing I knew, the governor was sending down a bill. Then I ran into the president and he asked me if I would be proceeding with my bill, and I said yes. And then he said, 'before you do that, I would like to speak with you,' and then I said okay, I will get in touch with your office, and then he said he was traveling and gave me the schedule of when he would return."

Mr. Roach said neither he, nor the UVI president, kept in touch with each other.

"Next thing, the letter from the president. Between that conversation and that letter, there was no reaching out on anybody's part. And there were no numerous attempts to contact. I didn't make them, and he didn't make them."

