

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Editorial | A Compelling Case For Free Tuition

Opinion / **Published On February 01, 2019 05:52 PM /**

Staff **February 01, 2019**



On January 4, 2019 Governor Kenneth E. Mapp signed into law Act 8155, entitled the Virgin Islands Higher Education Scholarship program. This bill was introduced by Senator Tregenza Roach, who now serves as Lieutenant Governor, and was unanimously supported by the 32nd Legislature.

This Act is part of a national movement that is attempting to transform the nation's understanding of the role and importance of higher education to the future of this country. Numerous states have enacted laws which provide free tuition for community colleges. Only the state of New York has enacted legislation that provides free tuition for four-year baccalaureate degrees. There are also various private colleges that have developed free tuition programs. However, with the passage and signing of Act 8155, the Virgin Islands

becomes the first and the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) now becomes the first Historically Black College and University (HBCU) that provides comprehensive free tuition to students within its state or jurisdiction.

Most of the state policies are dependent on the college or university's continuing receipt of federal aid for students and the creation of scholarships by private individuals and companies. Act 8155 is no different, and attempts to fill the gap between what the federal government and the private sector provides on an annual basis. Therefore, this policy is a transformative partnership between the local government, the federal government, the private sector and the University of the Virgin Islands.

Like many transformative policies, there are those who question the value of this approach, and others who would prefer a different label. Even within the University, there are those who support the policy but question whether a label like "free tuition" may come with unintended consequences. Their concern is that some students may undervalue the education they receive or the University if they believe it is free. They propose that naming this a scholarship program may have a different connotation. They are supported in this view since Act 8155 has an official name that does not use the word "free." However, the underlying policy that is being promoted by this legislation, and others like it, is more than just a scholarship program. Scholarship programs have existed at UVI and other colleges and universities since their founding. This Act is establishing an education policy and making a bold statement about higher education that must not be lost in the name. That statement is an unequivocal commitment to the important role of education, and especially higher education, in the lives and future of the people of the Virgin Islands, and the commitment to removing financial barriers so that students have free access to higher education.

There are numerous benefits that can emerge from a free tuition policy.

First, it has the potential to increase the number of individuals who are able to successfully obtain higher education degrees. Presently, the Virgin Islands ranks behind all states in regards to the percentage of individuals in the population who have college degrees. Only 11.4% of the Virgin Islands adult population have college degrees. This rate is much higher in most states and is as high as 40% in some states like Massachusetts. This policy is intended to dramatically improve this percentage, and move the territory to a more appropriate level. College completion is enhanced through financial support provided by various stakeholders, including the institution.

Second, economic development within any state or territory is inextricably linked to the talents, skills and degrees that individuals within the population possess. Companies that already exist in the Virgin Islands and those whom we hope to attract in the future, are in need of highly trained individuals in order for their businesses to grow and prosper. As the economy expands so will the quality of life for workers, business leaders, and entrepreneurs. When we directly invest in education and college completion we are indirectly investing in economic development.

Third, there are studies that link educational attainment to crime reduction and the decrease of other negative social ills. The more students we can prepare and incentivize to pursue a college education the more likely it is that we can reduce the rate of crime in our communities. This linkage is not only a result of diverting students away from

negative opportunities because they are more engaged in the educational process. This linkage also exists because the earning power of those who pursue and obtain college degrees is significantly higher than those who do not. Therefore having the opportunity to earn more through legitimate means makes illegal opportunities less attractive. Removing the major financial barrier to college makes it more inviting to students, and more of them can envision themselves pursuing more rewarding goals. As Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. indicated in his recent State of the Territory Address, "the prevalence of crime is not the root of our problem. It is the bitter fruit of entrenched social and economic woes that have plagued our community for generations." Investing in education is planting seeds of hope that can bring forth a sweeter fruit in the future.

Fourth, free tuition policies send a compelling message to students at various levels of the higher educational spectrum that a college degree is essential for them to live prosperous and healthy lives. Public primary and secondary education are an investment that taxpayers and the government make because of the long held belief that they are essential to develop productive and well-rounded individuals. We have reached the point in this technological age where we must hold the same belief about higher education. A college degree is no longer a luxury that the rich and the academically and athletically gifted individuals can obtain. Higher education is a basic necessity and must be provided in the same way we provide other basic necessities.

Just as the United States must move into the modern age and embrace what numerous other countries have already implemented in regards to "health care for all," it must also embrace "what other countries have already implemented which is "higher education for all who qualify and are willing." The federal government through its Pell Grant program has already attempted to embrace this principle by providing funding towards tuition for students whose family's income falls below certain levels. It is now time for states and territories to provide the same relief to those whose Pell Grant does not cover all of their needs, and more importantly, for those families whose income disqualifies them for Pell Grants. Act 8155 allow the Virgin Islands to be a leader and history maker in this quest to make higher education accessible to all.

What truly makes the Virgin Islands approach to free tuition unique and compelling is that funds are also being set aside to support students in their quest to excel. The Act provides funding so that the University can establish new academic support programs to help more students in high school obtain a 2.5 Grade Point Average (GPA) and new programs at the college level that will help them to maintain a 2.5 GPA. Since financial assistance alone is not enough for some students, this Act creates a comprehensive remedy to what ails higher education. This aspect of the Act strategically empowers the University to make free tuition eventually available to every student in the Virgin Islands, regardless of their present performance. If they are willing to work hard and embrace the insights, support and guidance which will be provided, they can take advantage of this opportunity. The regulations passed by the UVI Board of Trustees permit high school students who have not obtained a 2.5 GPA in high school, to still receive funding if they obtain that GPA while at UVI.

The other unique feature of the Virgin Islands' approach is that the Act applies to any individual who meets the requirements regardless of when they finished high school. Most free tuition policies are limited to future graduating seniors in the particular state, however under Act 8155, it doesn't matter when individuals graduated as long as they

meet the requirements. There are individuals in the Virgin Islands who have put their educational dream on hold five, ten, fifteen or even twenty or more years ago. This policy enables and inspires them to now pick back up those dreams, brush them off, and pursue the fulfillment of that degree that they never was able to achieve in the past because of financial limitations.

When the history books are written about this territory there will be those who will record that at the dawn of 2019 the Government of the Virgin Islands, and thus the people of the Virgin Islands, glimpsed their future in the mirror of their own reality, and decided to shape it for themselves, so that it would be a brighter future, and a more perfect reflection of their potential and dreams.

The University is deeply in debt to Lt. Governor Roach, the 32 Legislature, Governor Kenneth Mapp and all of those who advocated for this transformative policy. The Board of Trustees of the University overwhelmingly supported this policy and stand behind the Administration as we attempt in the days and years to come to implement this policy in an effective manner. A copy of the Free Tuition Regulations that were recently passed by the Board of Trustees, which provides specific details and dates in regards to the Act's implementation, can be found at the following website, www.legvi.org or see this [direct link](#). Those interested in applying and have questions can contact the UVI Office of Admissions: St. Thomas (340) 693-1160; St. Croix (340) 692-4158 or <http://admissions.uvi.edu>. Visit our website at www.uvi.edu. March 1, 2019 is the deadline for applying for these free tuition funds. I encourage all Virgin Islanders to take advantage of this transformative opportunity to make their future brighter and their educational burden lighter.

Submitted on Friday by UVI on behalf of Dr. David Hall

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