

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Game Changer: Free College Tuition In USVI Shows First Signs Of Success

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What happens when you make attaining higher education a human right, instead of a privilege that needs to be paid for? One hundred and sixty-seven of 215 students who graduated from the Charlotte Amalie High School this month will be attending college in the territory to, among other reasons, take advantage of the free tuition being offered at the University of the Virgin Islands.

Excitement around free college tuition grew significantly following [the introduction of a bill](#) by former Governor Kenneth Mapp in September 2018. The measure, which was created largely by the university, sparked renewed hope that what was once a dream would become reality. "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,” Mr. Mapp announced at Government House on St. Croix in September.

The Internal Revenue Matching Fund, known as the rum cover-over funds, was identified as the source of funding for the new law, which UVI and the Mapp administration said would cost roughly \$3 million annually for up to 1,700 students, with UVI making up the rest through endowments and private funding -- something that UVI President David Hall said was possible.

“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. In a recent interview with The Consortium, RT Park officials revealed that funding to UVI this year is already more than \$900,000, up from more than \$700,000 in 2018, with officials projecting more than \$1 million in funding by the end of the fiscal year.

Following the announcement by Mr. Mapp, the author of a similar free tuition bill, former senator and current lieutenant governor, Tregenza Roach, reminded the territory of his own measure, which was drafted before the recently introduced one. In the end, prevailing ideas from both measures were meshed into the final bill -- with Mr. Roach retaining authorship -- and the measure sailed through the Legislature and was [signed into law by Mr. Mapp](#) early January, 2019.

The benefits of the new law was on brightest display during the graduation ceremony of the Charlotte Amalie Class of 2019 held at UVI. There, it was announced that 167 of the 215 graduates had decided to enroll at UVI, with free tuition an obvious and prevailing factor for many.

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The benefits of this new reality in the Virgin Islands could transform the territory in the coming years. One of the major problems the USVI has faced is losing its best and brightest -- and there are many -- to the US mainland upon completion of high school. Once these students become entrenched in the U.S. mainland style of living, where they also find jobs and build families, it is hard to pick up and move to the USVI, where news of a weak economy serves only to discourage any desire from these students to return home.

But with college now free here, more students across the territory, not just at Charlotte Amalie, are deciding to stay home. Parents, too, help shape this critical decision, as they are the ones most times paying for college.

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The results and benefits to be realized in the coming years are immense and could be game-changing: The depleted workforce that has forced employers to seek workers outside the territory will be mitigated; the territory will have more people as thousands of students stay home for education and to work, boosting the local economy; young entrepreneurs with fresh ideas will create new businesses in the territory (aided by the RT Park's Accelerator Program), creating a diverse field of opportunities while spurring growth.

"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," Mr. Mapp said during the announcement in September.

While tuition is now free at UVI, there are 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 no 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.