

Class differences

By Eileen McNamara, Globe Columnist | March 30, 2005

BEDFORD -- Call it the Froot Loops gap, but handy access to brand-name cereal is just not the burning issue at Middlesex Community College that it is at Harvard.

Juggling jobs, classes, and, often, spouses and children must have blinded these collegians to their culinary oppression, because no one in the student lounge yesterday even seemed to realize that the cafeteria does not stock Cocoa Puffs.

Just as alarming as their indifference to the scourge of generic breakfast foods that is fomenting a revolution at Harvard was the students' relative satisfaction with a largely part-time faculty and a less-than-expansive campus social life.

So near and yet so far, the 10 miles that stretch between here and Cambridge, where discontent has descended on Harvard Yard. Cereal-starved undergraduates, beset by cost-cutting dining hall managers, aloof professors, and a tepid party scene, have declared themselves more dissatisfied with college life than their peers at 27 other selective private colleges.

"It's a matter of expectations," figures Bill Murray, a real estate agent from Waltham taking classes at Middlesex Community College. "We're here for the degree."

If Murray and his classmates were inclined to complain, they certainly have more cause than their counterparts in Cambridge, as a report by the state Senate Task Force on Public Higher Education made clear this week. Pointing out that Massachusetts ranked 47th in the nation last year in state spending per capita on public higher education, the report called for an infusion of an additional \$400 million into the operating budgets of the five campuses of the University of Massachusetts and the 24 state and community colleges.

The report also urged more spending for capital improvements to deteriorating buildings and outdated laboratories. Governor Mitt Romney's budget for fiscal 2006 calls for a paltry 2.3 percent increase in spending for higher education.

This promises to be an issue for Romney whether he seeks reelection or pursues the Republican presidential nomination in 2008. In an era of GOP control of the corner office, Romney is going to have to explain why, in the words of this report, "Massachusetts is the only state in the nation spending less on public higher education than it was spending 10 years ago" and why "Massachusetts has recorded the largest decrease in state funding, a 32.6 percent reduction, adjusted for inflation, between 2001 and 2005."

Those numbers do not resonate in Harvard Yard the way they do at Middlesex Community College. Harvard graduates might be off to Wall Street or Silicon Valley, but 85 percent of the graduates of Massachusetts public colleges stay and work in the state.

Alex Baker takes two buses from his Arlington home to this 200-acre campus. If he misses the school shuttle at his last stop, he has a very long walk to class. He does not know what it is like at Harvard, but here, he says, his professors are accessible and the quality of instruction varies. "But that is to be expected anywhere," he says. "There are great philosophy classes here, as well as technical classes. It is as good as you want to make it."

Elliott Strauss, 28, works two jobs and hopes to find a fit here that he did not find at private schools. Sometimes, he says, the place feels like "high school with ashtrays," but then he goes to math class, where his professor "is the most demanding, inspiring teacher I have ever had."

What the Senate report did not address was the Romney administration's refusal to honor the raises negotiated three years ago with the union for those who teach, for short money and less glory, at the public colleges. That is a bigger issue for Murray than ready access to Froot Loops on campus. "Don't those kids all have refrigerators in their rooms?" he asks of the disgruntled Harvard students he has been reading so much about. "Couldn't they, like, just buy a box of cereal and a quart of milk?"

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