

DERRICK Z. JACKSON

Facing a chasm in higher ed

By Derrick Z. Jackson | March 4, 2005

MASSACHUSETTS Governor Mitt Romney vetoed nearly \$33 million in raises for faculty at the state's public universities and community colleges. The governor who tells us education is a civil right in K through 12 is the same one who accords public higher education professors all the dignity of a discount rack at his former signature company, Staples.

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UMass-Amherst has already gone through two decades of slow but dramatic erosion, with a drop in permanent faculty from 1,215 in the mid 1980s to 865 today. The ratio of students to permanent faculty has jumped from 19-1 to 24-1. Similarly, UMass-Boston has lost 15 percent of its full-time faculty in the last decade. At UMass-Boston, part-time teachers outnumber full-timers, and at UMass-Amherst, part-timers, according to the teachers union, teach 40 percent of classes.

Then you have Brown University, one of the Ivy League schools. It just announced a budget increase of 8.2 percent, a 5.5 percent salary rise for faculty, and a 9 percent rise in the number of faculty. While UMass-Amherst has become legendary in higher ed circles for budget cuts to its libraries, Brown is increasing library funding by 5.3 percent. At Brown there are 628 regular faculty for its 7,595 undergraduate and graduate students - a student-professor ratio of 12-1. That is half of the ratio of UMass-Amherst.

A similar chasm is visible in student aid. In the past five years, Massachusetts has slashed financial aid by 22 percent. To partially compensate for a 4.9 percent rise in tuition, Brown is proposing a 9 percent rise in student aid. As Brown increases aid, the number of students who receive Massachusetts grants for college has fallen from about 32,000 to under 27,000.

The basic notion that an Ivy League college has more resources than UMass is no news. What should be deeply disturbing about this latest juxtaposition is that it demonstrates how the richest nation in the world is plunging even more deeply into an impermeable two-tiered society of higher ed. Eighty percent of the nation's 14 million undergraduate college students go to public colleges. We already have a system where desperate

parents flood the most desirable private and public colleges with applications.

We are starving the public colleges at a time when only 3 percent of the enrollment in the nation's most selective colleges comes from the bottom 25 percent in family income. We are sending the clear message that public colleges are grimy places for rejects.

A quarter-century ago, according to the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute, the average professor at a public university earned 91 percent the salary of a professor at a private college. Today the average public college faculty member makes only 77 percent the money of a private university faculty member. No relief is coming from the Bush administration, which is cutting higher ed to fund the war and to give tax cuts to the wealthy.

Business Week has reported how the funding priorities of federal and state governments have forced public colleges into a chancellors-in-the-barrel mentality of flagship schools desperately lunging for privatization schemes to stay attractive while the nonflagship schools are left to compete for even less resources. While public schools get government cuts, private schools tap into endowments and gifts from the wealthy. Out of the \$24 billion donated to the nation's 3,000 colleges in 2003, just 20 institutions controlled \$6.2 billion of the money. The leader was, not surprisingly, Harvard, which has a \$22 billion endowment.

Harvard, Business Week pointed out, received the equivalent of \$28,300 per student in donations compared to \$36 per student at Palm Beach Community College in Florida. The Rand Corporation's Council for Aid to Education said that in general, "voluntary support is not likely to offset declines in other funding sources." David Breneman, an education scholar at the University of Virginia, told The Chronicle of Higher Education, "The most serious public policy issue involves the 90 percent or more of students and institutions that are not part of the meritocracy. Only when higher education is available to the bulk of potential students can we say that our system is strong."

Rand and Breneman say this even as the system weakens into permanent stratification with declines in public funding sources. Brown gives faculty a raise and increases their numbers. Romney, with his Harvard law and business degrees, treats public college faculty in Massachusetts like another box of printer paper at Staples. We are rapidly heading to a day where the worth of a public college education is the price of that box.

Derrick Z. Jackson's e-mail address is jackson@globe.com