

PHENOMenal News

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PHENOM Walks Across Massachusetts

By Jim Scafidi

I took part in a rally outside the State House as part of the October 7th National Day of Action to Defend Education, because here in Massachusetts, our system of public higher education is in crisis. Over the past several decades, there has been a steady trend of disinvestment by the state from our public colleges and universities.

But the rally was only a small part of what I did that week — it followed a six-day journey from Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, which is just a few hundred yards from the border of New York, to the State House itself—*on foot*. I was proud to be one of the “core group” of PHENOM walkers who walked approximately 114 miles from BCC to Beacon Hill.

We walked to raise awareness of the public higher education crisis. We walked to advocate for funding to

keep costs down and to keep teachers in their jobs. We walked to protest cut after cut after cut to our schools.

The state’s latest cut to public higher education, in the FY 2011 budget

in a decade.

In fact, the Commonwealth leads the nation in cuts to public higher education in recent years.

It is no wonder then that Massachusetts is ranked *46th in the nation* in per capita support for public higher education, and is among the *most expensive* states for students to pursue a degree. There are students today, even in public colleges, who work full-time jobs while they’re in school, and *still* graduate tens of thousands of dollars in debt (*more about this on page 3*). This is because we rely on a broken system of paying for college through high interest student loans, instead of direct funding to keep tuition and fees down. In short, the state abandons its duty to adequately fund our colleges, and the expense is passed on not only to students, but to the faculty and staff who take pay freezes, face layoffs, or get too discouraged and leave.



One minute rally. The cross-state odyssey paused in Boston to deliver the message: Massachusetts deserves a Great State of Mind.

(which Speaker DeLeo referred to at this year’s Democratic State Convention as “compassionate budgeting”) was a devastating 15% — the largest cut to public colleges and universities

Interview with Student Immigrant Movement Leader, Lai Wa Wu

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The Student Immigrant Movement (SIM) -- a group of undocumented students and their allies -- staged a three-week vigil in front of the State House in June 2010. The protest was a response to several anti-immigrant amendments adopted by the State Senate in the budget process. Opponents of the amendments pointed out that the undocumented are already denied health care, public housing, and in-state tuition rates. One particularly

amendment would have established a hotline for reporting suspected undocumented immigrants.

Within days after the amendments were announced, SIM members began their encampment to protest the amendments and gather petition signatures to have them dropped. Having worked with SIM on efforts to pass legislation to offer in-state tuition rates to undocumented students who meet certain requirements, PHENOM mobilized

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TIDBITS

Commissioner of Higher Education Richard Freeland, in a recent article in the *New England Journal of Higher Education*, wrote this “**Memo to Massachusetts.**”

The world has changed. What may have been true historically is no longer true. In our state’s quintessential knowledge economy, new jobs are in fields that require a college education. Population growth is stagnant; domestic in-migration is non-existent. Bright young professionals trained in our private universities often leave the state after graduation. The college-educated workers, executives and entrepreneurs of the future will come from the public-sector institutions that now educate two-thirds of the high school graduates who attend college within the state. These institutions do a terrific job, but they can’t sustain quality and affordability forever while enrollments grow and support stagnates. So wake up, Massachusetts. This is the 21st century.

PHENOM worked hard to defeat **Question 3**, the ballot question that would have cut the state sales tax by 52%. We focused our efforts on registering, educating and mobilizing students—a constituency that some people had written off, but which we knew had a big stake in defeating Question 3. “In Amherst, more University of Massachusetts students were turning out in Precinct 9 than usual,” said Patricia McLaughlin, precinct clerk. “And,” she said, “they’re coming well-prepared.” (*Springfield Republican*).

PHENOM Gets Around!

PHENOM continues to take its message all over the state. Here are a few of the places we’ve been in the last few months.

PHENOM was well received at presentations to the Democratic Town Committees in Amherst and Watertown.

We made presentations to Student Governments at numerous community colleges including Bunker Hill, Greenfield, Middlesex and Springfield Technical.

We hosted a debate on education among six candidates for the 2nd Franklin State Rep seat, and participated in another among four Representative and Senatorial candidates in Springfield.

We had events in conjunction with the Walk Across the State at Berkshire and Mass Bay Community College, Framingham and Worcester State Universities, and UMass Amherst and Boston.

Welcome to PHENOMenal News, published twice a year -- Fall and Spring -- to coincide with the school semesters. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

We are extremely grateful to the **Massachusetts Teachers Association** for printing this issue of PHENOMenal News.

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Student Debt: Making Budget Cuts Politically Tenable

By Benjamin Taylor, UMA student

A college degree is necessary for gainful employment today. That's common knowledge. Many of today's jobs that pay above the poverty line absolutely require a college degree. And yet getting a degree is more expensive today than ever before.

The result of these seemingly contradictory trends is a staggering national student debt burden of roughly \$833 billion. As Stephanie Kraft lays out the chilling tale in her article "Killer Loans," ** the student loan industry makes billions of dollars while turning college graduates into modern day indentured servants.

The *Killer Loans* story is a real shocker, laying out the way changes in student lending laws in the last two decades have eliminated basic borrowing protections (like the ability to discharge debt through bankruptcy). Kraft's article is replete with stories of students whose debts have grown exponentially *after graduation* to levels they will never be able to repay. In the case of one chiropractor who fell behind on payments of his \$70,000 student loans, his professional license was revoked and, with penalties, his debt grew to \$400,000. The stories highlight some of the worst symptoms

of a broken student loan industry.

The debt burden is by no means isolated to a few mistreated borrowers. Average student debt, according to ProjectOnStudentDebt.org, has nearly doubled since 1996 to \$23,300 (Massachusetts fares worse than the national average, clocking in at an average debt burden of \$24,484). The problem is bad and seems to be getting worse.



March around the State House, March 8, 2010 (photo: Ferd Wulkan)

In her article, Kraft cites student debt activist Alan Collinge's wish list of reform. Tops on Collinge's list is to re-establish bankruptcy protections to student loans. His second idea is to stop the practice of garnishing Social Security to repay student debt. A third recommendation would end the practice of revoking the professional licenses of delinquent borrowers.

While these proposals are perfectly reasonable, they don't go far enough. The practice of funding public higher education through individual debt should be abolished.

Student loans make budget cuts politically tenable. Whenever the state faces a budget crunch, public higher education is always the first to be cut, and the last to be restored. Unlike many other public goods, the cost of operating our public colleges can be readily shifted onto students. In fact, nearly a third of the operational budget for our public colleges in Massachusetts is now paid by student tuition and fees—much of that financed by student loans. If we funded our K-12 system the same way, the average MA high school graduate would be weighed down by nearly \$45,000 in debt.

A college degree is not only crucial to individual success. It is also increasingly important to America's success in the global marketplace. If we accept that reality, then we must fundamentally reassess how higher education is funded and how to abolish or minimize student debt at public colleges.

** Stephanie Kraft's article "Killer Loans" appears in the October 14, 2010 issue of the Valley Advocate and can be found online at <http://www.valleyadvocate.com/article.cfm?aid=12585>

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Walk Across Massachusetts

Our request is simple: "Let's be Average." PHENOM's goal over the next several years is to bring per capita support *up* to the national average, and the cost for students *down* to the national average. Sure, you probably think,



"well, that's setting the bar a bit low." But the reality of the crisis is this: to reach that goal of bringing funding and costs in line with the national average, Massachusetts would need to *dramatically increase* the amount of funding public higher education receives right now.

Since a college education is, according to President Obama, a "prerequisite to success" in today's economy, Massachusetts needs to reinvest in our colleges and universities. It needs to cultivate the Commonwealth's greatest renewable re-

source — its brainpower — so that we can then focus on being *better* than average. For that, I would walk across Massachusetts as many times as it takes.

Jim Scafidi has an Associate's degree from Bunker Hill Community College. He would love to transfer to UMass Boston to complete a Bachelor's degree in political science, but says "at present it's simply not something I can afford".

You can follow Jim's blog at <http://bornagaindemocrat.blogspot.com/>

From October 2nd to 7th, 2010, members of the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts walked from Berkshire Community College to the State House to dramatize the need for Massachusetts to become A Great State of Mind – a state with adequate higher education funding and manageable student costs at our public colleges and universities. October 7 was a National Day of Action to Defend Public Education.



The Walk started on a beautiful day just yards from the New York border at Berkshire Community College. A large group of walkers and bikers from Westfield State University led the way.



Sen. Stan Rosenberg and Rep. Ellen Story set a torrid pace as they led the Walk through Amherst. Dan Clawson and Sam Dreyfus of UMass Amherst struggle to keep up, with others far behind.

The Walk Across



Max Page and Ferd Wulkan from the Massachusetts Society of Professors got excited when they thought they found free college tuition in Worcester. (Max is covering up "Military.")



Leaving Framingham State U., the Walkers spread the word up and down Route 9.

INTERVIEW

Continued from page 1

to support the vigil, organizing volunteers to spend days — and nights — at the vigil site to help keep it going.

PHENOM: What was the reaction at SIM to the anti-immigrant amendments?

WU: We had several students who said if the amendments were to pass, their parents would undoubtedly leave the country for fear of persecution and the taking away of the minimal amount of health services they were offered.

One SIM student started crying in the middle of sharing the story about her diabetic mother losing access to her medication. We all knew something had to be done.

PHENOM: What led up to the decision to do a 24/7 vigil?

WU: It was a crazy idea someone brought up during a strategy meeting, an idea that a few students believed in. At some point, we realized this was too powerful an issue to not take that risk. We knew we needed to do this; the "how" would come later.

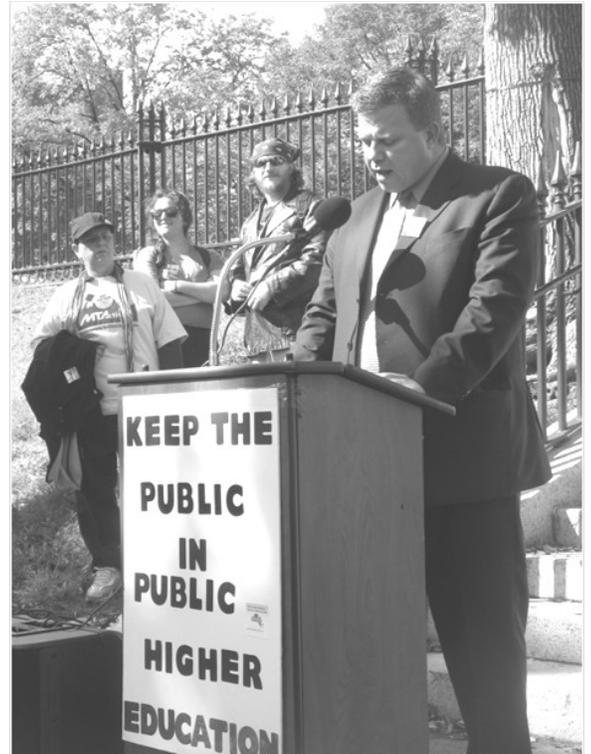


UMass Dartmouth students formed the largest contingent at the Rally, which coincided with the National Day of Action to Defend Public Education.

Massachusetts



The weather did not cooperate. In fact, a few rivers had to be crossed. The Walkers' agility complemented their perseverance.



Mass. Teachers Association President Paul Toner was one of many speakers at the State House. *Fund the Contracts! Invest in Public Higher Education! Keep College Affordable!*

PHENOM: How would you assess the impact of the action on the public?

WU: The vigil reinvented the common space in front of the State House. The community decided to take it upon themselves to change that space into a space of struggle, a space of security to share our stories, our fears, our dreams. The action became a space where we challenged each other to trust in our vulnerabilities and learn something from each other, to dispel myths surrounding immigration by listening to each other, being with one another.

PHENOM: With the amendments defeated, would you say there is now some momentum behind pushing for more positive changes in Massachusetts?

WU: In June, we were fighting against reactionary legislation, and now it's time for our community to fight for more positive changes, namely the DREAM Act. Recently, both Senator Reid and House leader Pelosi have publicly committed to pushing for the DREAM vote during this lame duck session. We have never been as close to passing this legislation as we are now.

For-Profit Colleges: A Specter Haunting Public Higher Education

By Ron Weisberger, faculty at Bristol Community College

The for-profit higher education industry is a specter haunting higher education. Here in Massachusetts, The Princeton Review (TPR), a private for-profit company, recently made a deal with Bristol Community College to offer allied health programs. Students are able to bypass long waiting lists — as long as they can pay much higher tuition.

Kaplan attempted to develop such an arrangement with the community college system in California. That deal was initially accepted, but then canceled because the public four-year institutions in the state wouldn't accept Kaplan's credits. TPR, a more recent entry into the for-profit business, succeeded in negotiating the *e Health Careers* arrangement, advertising that an associate's degree could be obtained in "as little as 15 months." But it will cost students \$7,700 to \$8,300 instead of the \$4,500 per year ordinarily charged at the college.

The growth and practices of for-profit colleges have in the last year been highlighted in the media, including an expose on the highly acclaimed PBS program Frontline, the *Economist*, the *Huffington Post* and *Good Housekeeping* among others. Both houses of Congress, and especially a Senate sub-committee chaired by Senator Tom Harkin, have highlighted fraudulent and/or deceptive practices carried out by some of the 15 top companies including Kaplan University and the University of Phoenix. These schools, which are owned by a variety of corporations, reap large profits from this enterprise despite (or perhaps because of) relatively low graduation rates and high student indebtedness. Much of their revenue comes from tax dollars in the form of federal financial aid.

Arnold Mitchum, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education, recently pointed out that low-income Americans are particularly vulnerable to be taken advantage of in the education "marketplace." It is then not a surprise that they are disproportionately represented in the for-profit institutions and, as the various exposes have pointed out, are often victimized. At the same time, it can be argued that public education as a whole is threatened by the rise of the for-profits.

The fact that one of these organizations, TPR, has gained a foothold in one of our public community colleges is of concern to PHENOM and should be to anyone who believes in the importance and mission of public higher education. The arrangement with Bristol is a dangerous first step as TPR officials talk about spreading the model to other schools and programs throughout the Commonwealth and beyond. Other for-profits have taken notice.

The implications of this development in regard to access, the quality of education and the erosion of the public's control of its own institutions are very serious. If the public is not alerted to the potential dangers of this encroachment, government officials who are feeling strapped by the decline in state and federal funds will take the "easy" way out and continue to sanction such arrangements. It was public demand that resulted in the development of a comprehensive system of public higher education in this state and country, and it can be public demand again that results in the stemming of its erosion. PHENOM aims to give voice to that demand.

SIM INTERVIEW Continued from page 5

These next few weeks are critical for our community, and we will need everyone from the MassHope Vigil to once again come out from the shadows in support of these students and their right to a pathway towards citizenship through college or military service. Call Senator Reid to tell him to fulfill his promise of pushing DREAM through the Senate.

PHENOM: Are there any plans in the works for taking on the in-state tuition issue in this upcoming legislative session?

WU: Yes, the DREAM Act will eliminate the federal provision that penalizes states from providing in-state tuition to all students regardless of their immigration status. This will finally allow the decision on in-state tuition to be handed back to each individual state. SIM's mission has always been to ensure all students in MA are granted the opportunity for higher education, regardless of their immigration status. If DREAM passes, SIM will push for in-state tuition as our next step.

Editor's Note: Almost three weeks later, with the vigil going strong and getting stronger, the amendments were dropped. SIM and its allies had achieved something unprecedented in this state: holding on to public space in a continuous action, galvanizing and uniting supporters, and quickly shifting the terms of the debate. PHENOM was proud to stand with SIM this summer, and we look forward to working with them to pass the in-state tuition bill and knock down all barriers to access to public higher education. PHENOM's Delegate Assembly endorsed the DREAM Act in September 2010. It provides a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who complete two years of college education or military service.

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Buy PHENOM's beautiful full-color 2011 Public Higher Education calendar featuring "then and now" photos of many of our campuses as well as of PHENOM activities "in the streets" and "in the State House."

Order online at www.phenomonline.org

COMECC & UMACC: EASY WAYS TO SUPPORT PHENOM

PHENOM is participating in the 2011 UMass Amherst Community Campaign (UMACC) and the COMECC (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Employee Charitable Campaign). This means that state employees can easily contribute to PHENOM as part of their charitable giving this year.

If you work at UMass Amherst, you can make tax-deductible contributions to PHENOM by payroll deduction or check (payable to UMACC) by using the pledge card you received from your UMACC Coordinator. It's easy! Fill out the pledge form with PHENOM's Charity Code: **700463** and return it to the UMACC Coordinator.

If you work at another campus or for another state agency you can make a tax-deductible contribution to PHENOM through **COMECC** by payroll deduction or check (payable to COMECC) by using the pledge card you received from your work-site COMECC coordinator. You can also pledge by payroll deduction or credit card online at www.comecc.net, PHENOM can be found by typing in our Charity Code: **700463**, under the "Find a Charity" section on the left, or **PHENOM** in the "Charity Name OR Keyword" box.

Please suggest to your co-workers that they consider PHENOM in their giving.

Your support allows PHENOM to advocate for an affordable, accessible, high quality and well-funded public higher education system in Massachusetts. Please give as generously as you can. You can mail your check to the address below or make an online contribution by visiting www.phenomonline.org. On the website you can also learn how you can support PHENOM as you purchase books, supplies and gifts!

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We are pleased that the Governor reiterated his support for a proposal that we put before him just after he was elected four year ago: extending free education from K-12 to K-14.
(November 16 in New Bedford)

After the rally on October 7 PHENOM turned in thousands of signatures calling *For A Great State of Mind*. Many legislators have already embraced the pledge and they are listed below.

Ask your legislator to join this list of higher education supporters!

I ask every candidate for statewide and legislative office to endorse the following and to take steps toward making it a reality:

Massachusetts must provide top-quality public higher education and must make it affordable for all. To these ends, the Commonwealth must ensure that per capita spending on public higher education is no less than the national average, and that student costs are no higher than the national average. Significant and measurable progress toward these benchmarks must be achieved by FY 2012.

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Rep. (to be Sen.) Catherine Clark
Rep. Mike Finn
Rep. Sean Garballey
Rep. Mary E. Grant
Rep. Jonathan Hecht
Rep. Donald Humason

Rep. Jay Kaufman
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Rep. (to be Sen.) James Welch
Sen. Benjamin Downing
Sen. Jennifer Flanagan
Sen. Patricia Jehlen
Sen. Stanley Rosenberg