

PHENOMenal News

VOLUME 7 ISSUE 1

Winter 2015 - 2016

Raising the Revenue Ceiling to Fund Public Higher Education

PHENOM is an active participant in the Raise Up Massachusetts campaign for a more progressive income tax. Dozens of members collected signatures for a state constitutional amendment that would raise revenue dedicated to education and transportation. The increase would come from an additional 4% tax on income above one million dollars.

PHENOM's Executive Director, Natalie Higgins, testified before the Joint Committee on Revenue on January 19, 2016. "We have so far to go to build the public higher education system we deserve in Massachusetts. We believe that the top earners in the state must pay their fair share in order to ensure we have an affordable and accessible public higher education system that also pays its staff and faculty fair and equitable wages."

The coalition collected over 157,000 signatures—more than any ballot initiative in Massachusetts history.

Juhi Dasrath, a student at Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) was one of our most dedicated signature collectors.

"I spent a lot of time running between classes in different buildings trying to collect signatures from the professors and their students," Dasrath said. "Not only were they super supportive of the petition initiative but STCC's union and administration also played a very important role in bringing awareness."

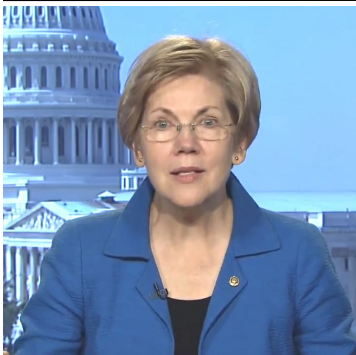
This was the first time PHENOM participated in this kind of signature campaign and collected over 1,500 signatures.



L-R: PHENOM Executive Director Natalie Higgins and Board Member Max Page listen to Marven-rhode Hyppolite's testimony. Also on this panel, Tom Goodkind, UMass Boston/Professional Staff Union. Photo by Scott McLennan.

When the petitions were delivered to the Secretary of State on December 1, 2015, PHENOM President Kimberly Selwitz told the rally, "Our tuitions and fees are among the highest in the country, and students are forced to take on enormous debt to receive a degree."

Continued on page 7



Access in the Spotlight

Senator Elizabeth Warren had some high praise for PHENOM and its efforts to fight for high-quality, affordable and accessible public higher education. She sent a video message to PHENOM's Conference on Expanding Access to Higher Education held November 7, 2015 at Mass Bay Community College.

Warren said, "Thank you for the important work you're doing each day to build opportunities for students in Massachusetts. You're making a real difference."

Over 50 activists and organizers from a majority of our public campuses and many community organizations spent the day tackling big issues. These participants identified barriers, shared best practices, and made recommendations. They considered transportation as well as policies and attitudes

Continued on page 7

What's Inside

Interview with Alex Nally	2
Affordability Forum	3
Student Immigrant Movement	3
PHENOM Activities	4
Community College Contract	5
Best Higher Ed is Free	6
Higher Ed Advocacy Day	8

Meet Alexander Nally, PHENOM's Newest Board Member

Natalie Higgins (NH): What is your major at the Massachusetts College of Art? Why did you choose a public arts school?

Alexander Nally (AN): I'm a senior in the Studio for Interrelated Media program. I chose MassArt because it was the only college campus I'd visited where I could see myself succeeding as a queer person who'd never been in a big city before.



Alex Nally, Senior,
Massachusetts College of Art

NH: What was your first introduction to PHENOM?

AN: I first heard of PHENOM as a freshman when I attended the 2013 Board of Higher Ed Annual Student Summit. I wanted to become more involved in Public Higher Education Advocacy Day, my favorite event of the year, and that's when I first got in touch with you.

NH: Tell me a little bit about your role on the MA Commission on LGBTQ Youth.

AN: I Co-Chair the Government Relations Committee and spearhead our Annual Agency Recommendations. Behind the scenes my committee meets with state agencies throughout the year to improve the quality of services and support for

LGBTQ youth in the Commonwealth. Through our work with the Department of Higher Education we've been able to ensure that campus health insurance plans cover gender-affirming surgeries, and I've recently been appointed to serve on the Commissioner's Campus Violence Prevention Task Force to represent the State University segment, ensuring that the DHE will do its best to keep LGBTQ students safe.

NH: What interested you in joining PHENOM's Board?

AN: I joined PHENOM's Board to try to foster more of a relationship between PHENOM and the BHE Student Advisory Council. I share the vision and dream of PHENOM to see free higher ed happen in Massachusetts and I wanted to contribute any skills I could to help achieve that.

NH: What are your hopes for the new MassArt Chapter?

AN: For the new MassArt Chapter I'm really excited to make a place for sustainable advocacy on the higher ed affordability front. MassArt has an incredible history of serving up some serious student activism up on the Hill, so I can't imagine the revolutionary things this chapter will accomplish.

NH: What would free public higher ed mean to you?

AN: Free public higher ed would mean that no student should ever have to consider their education over their health, or their education over their family. It would mean that we as a society would have more faith in everyone's ability to succeed rather than keeping opportunities locked away in the Ivory Tower.

PHENOM

Officers

President

Kimberly Selwitz
Alum, Framingham State University

Vice President

Colleen Avedikian
Faculty, Bristol Community College

Treasurer

Max Page
Faculty, UMass Amherst

Clerk

Carl Ericson
Staff, UMass Amherst

Team Leaders

Communications

Alexander Nally
Student, Massachusetts College of Art

Fundraising

Gillian Mason
Organizer, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice

Legislative

Ken Haar
Retired Faculty, Westfield State University

Organizing/Training

Manny Pintado
Alum, UMass Amherst & Holyoke CC

Newsletter Editor

Dale LaBonte
Staff, Quinsigamond Community College

Staff

Natalie Higgins
Executive Director

Ferd Wulkan
Organizing Director

Ben Taylor
Technology and Accounting Consultant

PHENOM

PO Box 2249

Worcester, MA 01613

phenom@phenomonline.org

<http://www.phenomonline.org> 978-227-8473

Affordability Addressed in Forum

PHENOM's dual focus on short-term incremental improvements and real long-term solutions was on vivid display at PHENOM's "Forum on the Crisis of Affordability in Higher Education," held October 14th at UMass Amherst. Congressman Jim McGovern and Chris Cappucci, aide to State Representative Paul Mark, presented candid



appraisals of what to expect through the legislative process in the next year.

Maggie Thompson, from the "Higher Ed Not Debt" project and PHENOM's Natalie Higgins, discussed the growing movement for some version of free higher education. Maggie said activists are not yet at the point of choosing one over the other. We need to support any movement toward free, debt-free or fully-funded higher education, whether for two years or four years.

The forum also explored open educational resources, loan forgiveness, and the Fair Share Tax Amendment as solutions to the affordability crisis.

Thank you for all of your incredible support in our 10 Days to \$10K Challenge! In just 10 Days, PHENOM has had our most successful fundraiser to date, with 166 donations raising \$10,938.00!

PHENOM's 10 Days to \$10K Challenge
 Thursday, 11/26 - 5:00 PM
Challenge Completed!
 Join the movement for free higher ed in Massachusetts

PHENOM depends on the support of its members to have the resources to continue to fight for well-funded, affordable, accessible, well-staffed and democratically-governed public higher education in Massachusetts.

Consider becoming a sustaining member of PHENOM today. Visit <http://bit.ly/supportPHENOM>.

Guest Column: Student Immigrant Movement Urges Baystate Action on Education Equity

By: Carlos Rojas-Álvarez, Campaign Coordinator

When I was five, my parents immigrated from Medellín, Colombia to Boston, Massachusetts in search of opportunity and a better life for their only son. The promise of the American Dream drew us to the cradle state of public education in America where I immediately fell in love with school.

We worked hard. Each of my parents held down two, sometimes three, jobs and I enrolled at Boston Latin School where I took on any and every challenging class and extracurricular activity I could, all in the hopes that someday I would be able to go to college.

Unfortunately, Massachusetts is NOT one of the more than 20 states that already allow undocumented students like me to qualify for in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities regardless of immigration status. Our state has fallen behind Texas, Florida and Oklahoma, among others, in ensuring access to higher education for immigrant students to the detriment of families, colleges and universities, and our economy,



Student Immigrant Movement (SIM) activists rally at the State House — July 2015. Far left: Carlos Rojas-Álvarez.

which depends on an educated workforce to remain competitive. This year, I will finally be applying to college three years after graduating from high school. I hope to stay in Massachusetts close to family and loved ones in a state I consider home but I'm worried that I won't be able to afford it.

In 2016, the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Higher Education has a historic opportunity to assert the universal value that education is a human right for all, not just some, by supporting the Education Equity Act, which would allow thousands of undocumented students like me, to finally fulfill our dreams of attending college in the Commonwealth. At a time when all of our public community colleges and universities and teachers and professors across the state demand action on tuition and financial aid equity, we call on the Massachusetts legislature and the Democratic Party that controls it to act and do the right thing.

PHENOM Hits DC, Next on to California

On December 1, 2015, the Center for American Progress hosted “Exploring the Geography of Student Debt: How States and Municipalities Can Act.” This was an opportunity for PHENOM to share its work to a broader audience.

PHENOM was invited to discuss our work with Raise Up Massachusetts on the Fair Share Amendment campaign and our free public higher education campaign. We received some great feedback about our campaign from participants, who included livestream viewers.

That afternoon, PHENOM’s Executive Director met with activists from a number of states who are tackling the crisis of affordability of higher education at both the state and municipal level. In January, Generation Progress released a report: *We Can’t Afford To Wait: How States and Municipalities Can Help Curtail the Student Debt Crisis*, which laid out a number of the solutions we are implementing in our own communities. At the next General Assembly Meeting, we will discuss a number of these projects and how we can work them into our three-year campaign.



In April 2016, PHENOM’s President, Kimberly Selwitz, and Executive Director, Natalie Higgins, will be traveling to the National Education Association’s Higher Education Conference in San Diego, California to present a workshop on the collaborations in our Campus Chapters between students and union members.

How Do I Start a PHENOM Campus Chapter?

PHENOM Campus Chapters are an essential part of PHENOM’s work, strengthening relationships among students, staff, faculty, and the larger community on individual campuses, while creating a statewide network of advocates.

To start a Chapter on your campus, email us at phenom@phenomonline.org.

We would like to thank the Massachusetts Teachers Association for a major grant enabling PHENOM to launch new campus chapters.

A Message from Kim Selwitz and Natalie Higgins



Kimberly Selwitz , PHENOM President, (L) with Executive Director Natalie Higgins

PHENOM is about to celebrate its 9th anniversary as an organization, and we sure have come a long way in those nine years! What started as a burgeoning organization nine years ago now is a diverse non-profit with involvement among faculty, staff, students, alumni, and those passionate about public higher ed all across Massachusetts.

Our work with PHENOM is very personal.

Kim found out about PHENOM in the spring of 2010, as an undergraduate at Framingham State University, active in student government. As a student with mounting student debt at a public university, she connected with PHENOM’s message. Elected to the Board three years ago, she was excited to take on the role of President.

Natalie discovered PHENOM when she was fresh out of law school in the summer of 2014. As a proud first generation student and graduate of UMass Amherst, PHENOM was the perfect way for her to pay forward the opportunities she got as a public university student, and to take on the student debt crisis. With extensive debt herself, Natalie understands the dilemma many students face.

For years, PHENOM and its activists were considered too progressive, too radical, too caught up in unrealistic goals. And then we hit a major turning point. President Barack



Continued on next page

Community College Faculty & Professional Staff Deserve a Fair Contract

PHENOM supports the faculty and professional staff at the community colleges who have been protesting insufficient progress made at the bargaining table. They have now worked over six months without a contract. Represented by the Massachusetts Community College Council (MCCC), faculty and professional staff members have been on “Work to Rule,” which means refusing to do work and beyond what is contractually required.

While this may seem like an inconvenience to some students in the short run, a good contract will lead to a better education and campus environment for all.

One of PHENOM’s 5 principles



Signs of the times on a faculty office door at Bristol Community College

is “Honor and expand democratic institutions of governance in public higher education.” Strong unions are an essential component of a healthy democratic campus. Proper pay, benefits and working conditions for faculty and staff are critical to providing quality education to students. Working together in PHENOM, thousands of union members and students have come to see that their interests coincide. Good working conditions are indeed good learning conditions. And affordable and accessible campuses allow students to be fully engaged, leading to more satisfying work lives for staff and faculty.

PHENOM chapters at community colleges have been supporting the MCCC members on their campuses in the fight for a fair contract.

Obama announced his America’s College Promise Proposal. He even used the same approach PHENOM’s leaders have been using for years—let’s make college free and universal, just like public K-12.

To say our Fall Agenda was ambitious is an understatement. We gathered 1,500 signatures for the Fair

Getting the chapter started back up again at WSU has been an exciting time and a learning experience. Hopefully in the following semester we can add some more students to our chapter and really start to do some great things on our campus!

Hanna Homan, Undergrad, Westfield State University

My experience as a chapter coordinator for PHENOM thus far has broadened my knowledge not just on the technical side of the higher education realm, but also in the key bare essentials such as access issues involved with college students especially first generation students, acquiring a college degree. The opportunities that have presented themselves to me such as being able to present on a panel dealing with access issues and getting an amazing shout out from Elizabeth Warren have been as we like to say PHENOMENAL!

Amy Blanchette, Undergrad, Bristol Community College

Share Amendment, hosted a Forum on the Crisis of Affordability in Higher Education with Congressman Jim McGovern and Higher Ed Not Debt’s Maggie Thompson, and brought back PHENOM’s Access Conference. This brought together more than fifty activists from fifteen of our public colleges and universities, and the support of Senator Elizabeth Warren. Throw in our most successful fundraiser to date, new grant funding, and ten active campus chapters and PHENOM is finally becoming the real powerhouse we both knew it could be: an organization that can truly energize the “sleeping giant” of public higher education and win battles against the corporatization of the system.

Organizing for PHENOM at UMass Amherst has been a great opportunity for me to learn more about activism while working on such a crucial issue.

Joel Spiegel, Undergrad, UMass Amherst

We hope you will join us in 2016 as we prepare for our fifth Public Higher Education Advocacy Day with the Public Higher Education Summit Group, get ready to launch our multi-year campaign for free public higher education in Massachusetts, and celebrate 10 years fighting for public higher education in the Commonwealth!

The Best Higher Ed is Free

The public higher education system in Massachusetts was designed to make public higher education accessible to the working classes, with costs to students as close to free as possible. Remarkably, for more than a century, that remained largely true. Along with America's stunning economic growth after World War II, education contributed to the growth of a broad middle class.

But over the past thirty years, due in large measure to tax cuts resulting in massive cuts to public higher education, the cost of attending college has risen dramatically.

Until 1987, a student could attend UMass Amherst and graduate completely debt-free by working a 10-hour minimum-wage job during the school year. Now that same student graduates with over \$30,000 in debt. This hampers their ability to choose the career they are most suited for, and to start a family, buy a house, and live without a weight of debt over their head.

We believe that now is the moment to fight to rebuild the promise of fully-funded public higher education to our citizens. PHENOM proposes to build on its past successes and on the current political concern around student indebtedness to launch a three-year plan to achieve high quality debt-free public higher education for residents of Massachusetts.

A few years ago, talking about "free higher education" was generally considered pie in the sky. But now, thanks to growing awareness of the student debt crisis and work by many groups such as PHENOM, we have a U.S. president proposing free community college; three Democratic presidential candidates and numerous members of Congress proposing "free" higher education. The two Chairs of the Higher Education Committee in the state legislature have jointly filed legislation for free community college. The Massachusetts Teachers Association has also voiced its support for free public higher education. And now, a widely-supported progressive tax campaign targets affordable public higher education as one of its main goals.

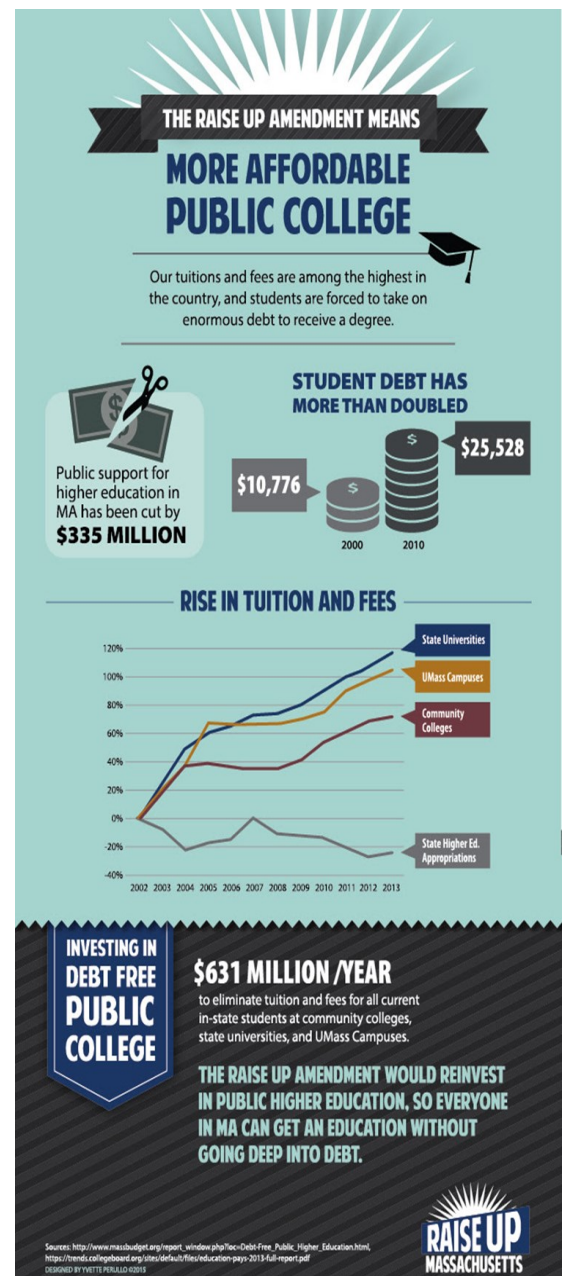
The central problem public higher education advocates have faced in

trying to win even modest increases in spending on public higher education -- to raise the quality and affordability of the system -- is that the legislature has been hamstrung by a lack of tax revenues caused by twenty years of tax cuts.

But now, the Raise Up Massachusetts coalition, more than 150 labor, religious and community organizations of which PHENOM is a member, has successfully launched a constitutional amendment initiative process (see the page 1 article in this issue) to win a new tax on yearly incomes over \$1 million, with the resulting \$1.9 billion in revenues dedicated to transportation, public education and public higher education. Indeed, when asked in public opinion polls, respondents said that among their greatest concerns was the affordability of public higher education.

PHENOM is building a coalition that will work over the coming years to help pass the amendment (due for a vote in November of 2018) and then convince the legislature -- either in advance of that vote, or in the new session that meets starting in January of 2019, to make some form of free quality public higher education a major focus of the new revenues.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a fundamental shift in how we fund public higher education, making it accessible to all our residents, thereby improving their life chances, and improving the Commonwealth's economic and social life. The problems of access are at crisis proportion; the concerns are now widespread; and we see a funding mechanism before us. Now is clearly the time to take bold steps.



Raising Revenue *Continued from page 1*

“We need to invest in public higher education, to make it affordable for low- and middle-income students in our state.”

PHENOM members and other labor, faith, and community groups had thousands of conversations about income inequality, the need to fund public education, and the power of ordinary people to effect social change.

The next steps of the process require constitutional conventions be held in 2016 and 2017. At least 25% of legislators need to vote in favor of the amendment.

PHENOM will again participate in this effort, and is confident of success.

“While this might not affect me while I’m still a student,” Dasrath said, “I know that my efforts, along with the help of many other strong-willed individuals, will help make higher education more affordable (and even free!) for my little sister and all the children who don’t yet know where their dreams can take them with a college education.”

Raise Up Massachusetts has two other active campaigns. One is paid family and medical leave while the other calls for a “living wage” of \$15 an hour for big box retail workers and fast food employees.



Andriana Foiles-Sifuentes leads a discussion of the “Ivory Tower” at UMD with 200 students.

Access Conference *Continued from page 1*

that can restrict access.

Sessions focused on students of color, first generation students, transgender and other GLBTQ students, students with disabilities, immigrant students, students with children, low income students, and survivors of sexual violence.

Through follow-up meetings, reports and future conferences, PHENOM expects to continue the work of this conference.

One of PHENOM’s principles affirms “All our institutions of public higher education should serve the full range of students in the Commonwealth.” While PHENOM has done a lot of work around affordability, we recognize that there are other barriers to accessing a college education besides cost.

As Senator Warren concluded “It is powerfully important to bring down the barriers that keep too many individuals from pursuing higher education. It is important to ensure that students from all backgrounds have the resources they need to succeed in college. A strong system of higher education is a central part of how we build a future.”

LIKE WHAT YOU READ? WANT PHENOM TO DO MORE OF THIS GOOD WORK?

Your support allows PHENOM to advocate effectively for an affordable, accessible, high quality and well-funded public higher education system in Massachusetts. Please give as generously as you can by mailing your check to the address below or making an online contribution at bit.ly/supportPHENOM. On the website you can also learn how you can support PHENOM as you purchase books, supplies and gifts!

Enclosed is my donation of: \$50 \$100 \$250 \$500 Other

Name Email

Address City State Zip

Phone Affiliation

PHENOM is a 501c(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowable by law.

Please cut this form out and mail it with your contribution to:
PHENOM, P.O. Box 2249, Worcester, MA 01613

P. O. Box 2249
Worcester, MA 01613

Email: phenom@phenomonline.org
Website: www.phenomonline.org

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AMHERST, MASS.
PERMIT # 2



The Public Higher Education Summit Group presents

2016 PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION ADVOCACY DAY

Monday March 7, 2016 | 10AM - 2PM
Great Hall -- State House
Lunch will be provided

Register at bit.ly/PHEAD2016