

The Tyranny of Tuition

MaCall Underwood and Kai Payne

“Keisha is a hard worker and deserves to be awarded. She has good grades, volunteers, and works. Overall, Keisha is a really nice girl,” says Mr. Davis, her math teacher. Keisha Thompson, a senior at Norview High school currently has a 3.3 grade point average. She has always dreamed of matriculating into a four-year institution such as Old Dominion University. Hence, she has maintained good grades and participated in the step team, chorus, and the Honor Society in order to ensure her a place in college. Thompson has one complication she can’t afford college. Therefore, she has hoped and longed for someone to offer her a scholarship. Since the end of her junior year she applied to over fifty different academic needs based scholarship offers, and has received zero. Thus, she will be unable to live her life-long dream of attending college because she cannot afford it.

Breaking economic barriers to get into colleges is more challenging than ever. Keisha Thompson is a prime example because students there are most likely not afforded the same opportunities of the rich or wealthy. For example, Norview High school is a public school in Norfolk, VA. According to Lee Davenport, the Norview high school guidance counselor, there are over 2200 students enrolled and a majority of them are on free or reduced lunch. Therefore the average income for the parents of the Norview students is relatively low in order to qualify for these lunch options. Of those 2200 students, an estimated 50% go to college. Why is this? Is it because they have less of an advantage because they are poorer?

Norfolk Collegiate Upper School is a private school in Norfolk, VA. And according to Betty Jones, the college Norfolk Collegiate counselor, there are about 330 students in the school and the tuition is about \$10,000 a year. Of those 330 students, about 100% matriculate into a four year college. Jones says that she has never seen a lower rate of graduates to college than 96%.” Why the big difference between the public school and private school’s college rate? Obviously, Norfolk Collegiate private school is more successful than Norview High School, but why? Assuming that on average the parents of the Collegiate’s students make more than that of the Norview students’ parents, it is likely that income level is a vital issue. Wealthier students are perceived more likely to attend college. This is evident in the fact that about 100 college recruits visit the wealthier Collegiate while only about 40 visit the poorer Norview. Perhaps, the poorer schools or public schools are being left out on purpose. This is unfair because the poor remain in the poor schools because they can’t afford to attend the “good wealthy” private schools. How ironic that the only people allotted the opportunity to attend these schools are the already privileged.

College tuition is even more unaffordable than ever before. A four-year private college (like Virginia Wesleyan) is \$21,235 meaning tuition went up 5.9 percent from last year. A four-year public college (like Old Dominion) is \$5,491 a tuition increase of 7.1 percent from last year. And a two-year public college (like Tidewater Community College) is \$2,191 tuition at this level went up 5.4 percent from last year. Overall, students will pay, on average, from \$371 to \$386 more than last year for this year's room and board, depending on the type of college. The additional mandatory fees at Old Dominion University include general service fees, health fees, and transportation fees; these fees and other miscellaneous

fees (laboratory fees) range to about \$200+ per year. Additionally, those students fortunate enough to have cars pay a yearly \$116 for a decal. However, according to Rob Grandon, an Old Dominion parking services enforcement supervisor, these decals still won't guarantee a parking space because the ratio of people to allotted spaces is almost 3 to 1 -- 22,000 students searching for a spot among 8,500 parking spaces. The Vice President for administrative and finances at Old Dominion University, Bob Fenning, says that no money from tuition goes to the parking services. They have separate fees. On the same note, these separate auxiliary fees fund co-curricular activities like clubs.

Fenning acknowledges that tuition increases are a pressing issue because they impact so many students. His main objective is to work in the best interest of the students and the universities because "Old Dominion University is responsible to provide quality education," says Fenning. The increases are based on a six-year financial plan and Old Dominion's tuition rates are actually a little lower than the proposed plan. He realizes that tuition increases are a greater burden for the students but says the increases are critical for the students and the university.

So what do these increases actually pay for? According to Fenning, the increases pay for the advancement of Old Dominion University and its students. For example, the increases help increase available financial aid and investments in support services for students. They also help aid the salaries for faculty, building projects and the upcoming football team. Fenning explains that the students are among the number one contributors to the football team, as the alumni and self-generated revenue. Self-generated revenue consists of ticket sales, concessions and etc.

Old Dominion University, while unaffordable to the underprivileged, has one of the lowest tuition rates and smallest increases in the Virginia commonwealth. Although Old Dominion University was used for this story, it is important to realize the struggles of students attending other institutions like the University of Virginia and William and Mary College because these colleges are even more unreasonable in their tuition amount.

With that, who are really responsible for the tuition increases among colleges? The state government. If not granted any state money, the colleges are forced to charge the students. According to Vice President Fenning, this is especially true for Old Dominion University because they have been “historically under-funded.” Old Dominion University receives 75-80% of the necessary government funding; hence, Old Dominion is forty million dollars in the whole. There has been a 21% downfall in state funding. Additionally, there is a big gap in the government funding between University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University and Old Dominion University and George Mason College. “For every one dollar University of Virginia receives in government funding, Old Dominion University receives sixty cents,” says Fenning. Therefore, colleges simply take the minimum from students to complement state funding. Fenning explains that the state funding in addition to the students fees and tuition equals revenue for the school. (State \$+Student \$= school’s revenue)

Even still, many students struggle with the cost of college tuition, as it rises every year. The fact that these state schools have increased the price of college education has affected many students and parents financially. Some issues these students face are taking out loans that can lead to long- lasting debt, having no available financial aid to pay for

classes, having to work one or more jobs, having to drop classes to a minimum and/or take off a semester. All of these things can result in graduating late, or dropping out of school.

Meron Seife, 20, a sophomore attending Old Dominion University and Angel Woodard, also 20, a full-time junior, gave further insight on the issue. Seife states that she doesn't like tuition increasing and she definitely does not agree with it. Woodard feels like tuition going up is plain ludicrous. One of the biggest concerns for students of Old Dominion is the high cost of construction. According to Seife, she wonders if the "extra money we are paying to the school is going towards renovations, new buildings and dorms.

Seife, from Silver Springs, MD says when she first applied to Old Dominion the cost of out of state tuition was way too high for her and her mother. Her mom asked her father who resides in Northern Virginia to use his address so she can get the instate tuition rate, and higher grants through financial aid. Seife's mother pays for her tuition costs. Seife also states that she "doesn't know how her mother pays for it, but somehow she does it."

These college tuition increases are really affecting Seife and Woodard who still have a few years left until graduation as they both work two jobs. Working two jobs makes it difficult to manage time. Woodard says that it is very stressful being a full time student and working two part time jobs. The reason why Woodard and Seife work so hard is because their financial aid has either been taken away or decreased. As for Seife she lost one of her aids and another aid decreased which was instate grant because financial aid didn't have any more funds for grants. Woodard is also in the same boat.

Both of these young ladies work about 30 hours a week on and off campus. Woodard states she works so much because she needs to pay off student loans that are unsubsidized, which means she can pay them back after graduation. Seife, on the other hand,

has to pay her loan back by March 2007 because it was an emergency loan taken from Old Dominion. According to Woodard and Seife the increase in tuition costs have made them more aware of how they budget their money because a slight mismanagement can result in dropping out of school.

According to Elisa Everett, a high school counselor at Thomas Jefferson High School and Alumni of Old Dominion, taking out loans for college can affect your credit in the long run. Everett says “she has learned from experience.” When she graduated she had many loans that she had to pay back, and she says that she feels bad for the students that have to take these loans out. Everett states that she can only imagine years from now how much tuition will cost. On average, tuition tends to increase about 8% per year. This means the cost doubles every nine years. According to the website www.Finaid.org, this means a baby born today will see tuition that is more than three times the current rates.

Gayle Saunders, 46, of Richmond, is a parent of an Old Dominion student. College tuition increases affect her because she has to make a lot of sacrifices to keep her daughter in school, and she has a very tight budget now. Under many circumstances Saunders feels she does whatever is necessary to keep her daughter in school because she believes education is of utmost importance. Saunders believes that college tuition increases don't help working families because most salaries don't increase so it makes it harder for working mothers and fathers to pay for a college education. Saunders states that the tuition increase only helps the professors, but not the working class. She is a college graduate and she wants her daughter to be the same. So, she says she will continue paying high costs for tuition until her daughter has her degree because there are no other alternatives.

Mone Williams, 24, of Chesterfield, VA, is an alumnus of Old Dominion graduating class of 2005 and she says that the tuition increase limits many people from attending college. Williams states that alumni give back money to help the university and its students, but tuition seems to still increase. Williams feels what is the point of giving back all this money if it's not helping the cost for students' pursuit for education. Williams wants to know where the money that she gives is going. According to Everett she also gives back and she likes the fact that the campus is building, expanding, getting a football team; and also making Old Dominion an even better school than when she attended. But at the same time Everett feels that the burden should not fall on the students.

Williams says that she was one of the fortunate students to receive a scholarship, but many students do not get that opportunity. Williams also states that the school and government should have more money for aid towards the cost of tuition, books, and living. Williams says a lot of college students work, and still don't have anything to show from working because they are either paying off loans, or current tuition balances. Williams feels something shall definitely be done about this issue because it's hurting the students and the families as well.

Lisa Boyce, 37, of Hampton, says "my daughter wants to go to your school, but it is quite expensive." Her daughter, Alisia, attends Thomas Nelson Community College. Boyce just turned 19-years-old and has great potential. She states that the cost of schooling is too much money. Boyce's goal is to become a dental hygienist, but she doesn't know how she will pay for it. Boyce says she plans to wait at least a year and save up money to attend Old Dominion University, and receive the proper education for her field of study.

According to Khalif White, 23, and a former student of Old Dominion, “sometimes you have to work hard, and save your money to get a decent education.” White had to drop out of school recently because he didn’t have enough money to pay for his last semester. Therefore, he is working a fulltime job and saving his money to graduate in May 2007. Dropping out for a semester set White back from graduating on time and this is what many other college students go through as well.

Norfolk Vice mayor Paul Riddick’s view on this issue is against tuition increases -- he doesn’t feel that students should have to take the brunt (or pay the price) for the colleges. Riddick also articulates that it is unfortunate that students have to pay for various issues. Some of the issues that tuition increases pay for are rebuilding college campuses, adding on to college campuses, professors’ salaries and benefits. Riddick also explained that the federal and state governments are no longer funding education as they did previously and thus, the increases fall on the students. For example, says Fenning, in the late 80’s, colleges got formula funding, however, today the government only provides base funding. Of that base funding, or just enough to get by, George Mason College and old Dominion University receives the least of the prominent schools.

According to Katherine Baird of The Johns Hopkins University Press, “rising tuition has led many states to offer college prepaid tuition plans. These plans are consistent with the trend in higher education policy toward meeting the needs of wealthier households.”

Needless to say, this is another way to discourage the poor or less fortunate.

Furthermore, the idea of getting a scholarship is almost nonexistent and unheard of for most students. According to Karen Kendall, the scholarship coordinator for Old Dominion, “less than 10% of students receive in house scholarships.” Kendall further

explains “Students eligible for any endowed scholarships usually have at least a 3.7 grade point average” but that the other criterion usually varies from scholarship to scholarship.

Kendall points out that the scholarship process at Old Dominion is really competitive.

Moreover, the financial aid process is long and involved as well. Overlooking the most trivial thing can result in a cancellation of any federal money or financial aid.

According to the Old Dominion website, <http://web.odu.edu/af/finaid/index.shtml> some financial aid clock stoppers include but aren’t limited to “Late Application and Enrollment Status Change,” “Documents Requested for Verification Not Received and Incorrect,” and “Discrepant or Estimated Information” on the FAFSA form. Because this form’s priority deadline is Feb. 15th, most of the information may be estimated because many people haven’t received their tax return yet. Moreover “Special or Extenuating Circumstances for Professional Judgments” can alter the financial aid awards. It is unclear what circumstances would be considered “special or extenuating.” Also the website explains that “financial aid administrators may exercise individual professional judgment concerning adjustments to data affecting a student’s eligibility for aid.” Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that a student may be neglected financial aide. According to Fenning, \$320 million dollars of financial aid is set aside for Old Dominion students.

In conclusion, increasing college tuition affects the lives of students, families, potential students, alumni, etc. In today’s society, a bachelor degree is worth having and many students do not get that chance because of the inflated tuition rate. If the rates of college tuition are lowered this will open the doors to much success in current students, potential students, and their families.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to accomplish great things in life and having a college degree is one of them. As for Keisha Thompson, she doesn't face this battle alone because tuition increases are affecting many others too. Hopefully, a change will enable Thompson to live her long life dream, and provide a successful future for other students just like her. Making it through college is hard, but not having the funding to do so makes it even more difficult and overbearing. For more information, or to make any complaints about college tuition increase contact SCHEV (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia) at (804) 225-2600, or visit their website www.schev.edu.