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# Maryland's Higher Education Gains at Risk

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# Maryland's Higher Education Gains at Risk

## **Abstract**

This Op-Ed described the struggles that Maryland's higher education is currently facing, outlining several solutions.

## **Disciplines**

Education | Higher Education

# Maryland's higher education gains at risk

Laura Perna and Joni Finney

When it comes to higher education, Maryland has plenty to be proud of.

In 2008, the higher education funding commission (known as the Bohanan Commission) developed a farsighted plan to boost the state's investment in higher education, hold down tuition and increase state financial aid. At a time when many states have piled tuition increase after tuition increase on the backs of students and their families, Maryland has done its best to keep the lid on. The governor, legislators, and college and university presidents worked together to freeze tuition at four-year institutions for four years. In 2010, a new law capped undergraduate tuition increases at the percentage rise in median family income.

And state leaders — governors, legislators and higher education administrators alike, with the approval of Maryland's voters — have built a reputation for working together to support higher education and set clear goals for the state's colleges and universities. One of their most important goals is to increase the share of Maryland's adult population that holds at least an associate degree from 44 percent to 55 percent by 2025, so that the state can compete globally in the high-tech 21st century economy.

But Maryland is in danger of losing precious ground. A study we conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the University of Pennsylvania's Institute for Research on Higher Education points to a number of warning signs.

When the economy soured, many of the funding commission's recommendations were put on hold, set aside to wait until the economy improves and the state's revenues begin to rise. The trouble is, economic recovery has been a long time coming. Despite some glimmers of improvement, Maryland's revenues may be stagnant for years to come.

That means Maryland is trading water, waiting for a rising economic tide to get higher education reform going again.

There's danger in resting on your laurels. Just look at Illinois. Not long ago, Illinois' colleges and universities were the envy of much of the nation. But our research shows that after a decade of drift thanks to a vacuum of leadership for higher education, tuition in Illinois is spiraling out of control; a smaller percentage of Illinoisans are enrolling in and completing college; and promising efforts to do something about the inequities that stand in the way of a college education for Illinois' most vulnerable citizens have fallen by the wayside.

Maryland should beware, then. The case of Illinois shows that once a state's higher education system starts to slip, it can go downhill fast. But complacency isn't the only danger.

For one thing, despite the state's efforts to hold down college costs, tuition in Maryland remains well above the national average. Maryland also lacks a coherent set of policies for making sure

that high school students are ready for college and making sure they finish college once they enroll. Most pressingly, if Maryland is going to meet its goal for producing a more educated citizenry, it must help more disadvantaged and minority children go on to earn college degrees, especially in Baltimore. Today in Baltimore, only 29.5 percent of adults hold at least an associate degree, compared to 44 percent of Marylanders overall.

One hurdle is that Maryland currently bases its funding for higher education institutions on enrollment, rather than providing strong performance incentives that could encourage these institutions to improve academic preparation and college completion.

The Higher Education Investment Fund, created in 2007, was an important step toward reducing the volatility of state appropriations. But it wasn't enough. What the Great Recession has taught us is that Maryland needs a plan for strengthening higher education that works in good economic times as well as bad.

Sure, more money would be great. But if it wants to meet the goals it has set for itself, Maryland needs to get moving on higher education reform now, not years from now.

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