



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

## Ortt Unveils Agenda to Make College More Affordable and Attainable

ROBERT G. ORTT June 27, 2016

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**SUNY BROCKPORT** – Recent graduates will soon be heading off to college, and Higher Education Committee member Senator Rob Ortt (R,C,I – North Tonawanda) today unveiled another part of his “Shake up the Status Quo” Plan, which includes helping students statewide better afford a college education.

During a press conference at The College at Brockport, Senator Ortt outlined his 2017 legislative package of bills to help make college debt less burdensome for thousands of students and families. The bills deal with community college scholarships, establishing an apprenticeship program for career readiness, requiring public disclosure of financial statistics to current and potential college students, and reforming New York's Tuition Assistance Program.

**Senator Ortt said,** "The rising cost of college tuition over the years has burdened families and left students drowning in debt even before they graduate and start a career in their chosen field. We've reached a critical mass as graduates push important life decisions into their 30s and 40s, because they're overwhelmed with debt and parents delay retirement to help their kids pay for college. By expanding financial and career opportunities for students and increasing accountability among higher education institutions, we can improve higher education and help restore the American dream."

**The College at Brockport President Dr. Heidi Macpherson said,** "While SUNY provides one of the best college values in the Northeast, college affordability remains an important issue in this country. Senator Ortt understands that many families across New York State struggle with college debt, and I'm grateful for his efforts to improve how we fund and support higher education."

**Niagara University Junior and Turning Point USA Field Director Christian Lemke said,** "Too often politicians jump to conclusions before identifying the problem. The solution to the college debt problem isn't dealing with this dilemma post graduation, it's about preventing it. It's time we as a state and a country, start being proactive about the debt problem rather than reactive. Transparency is the key."

The exponential increase in the cost of tuition and the amount of money students have to borrow go hand in hand. A 2015 report from the Project on Student Debt showed that the average debt of a Class of 2014 borrower graduating from a four-year college in New York State was \$27,822. That debt level increased from a decade ago when the average student loan debt was \$18,857 in 2004.

The average debt of 2014 graduates at Buffalo State SUNY was \$24,290. Student debt data for Niagara University, a private institution, showed an average debt of \$30,289 for 2014 graduates.

The Buffalo public and charter schools have the Say Yes to Education scholarship program for eligible graduates allowing them to attend any SUNY or CUNY school and more than 90 private colleges with the full cost of tuition covered. While this is a great program, there are many more students throughout the state who deserve similar opportunities. Senator Ortt's proposed legislation will help tens of thousands of individuals achieve the dream of attending college.

Legislation sponsored by Senator Ortt and supported by the Senate Majority to help reduce unsustainable student debt includes:

- **(S6838)** Launching the "Learning for Work Program" that establishes a Youth Apprenticeship Program for high school juniors or seniors. The apprenticeship program would combine academic work in the classroom with mentored on-the-job training to advance career readiness. This legislation would also offer an Enhanced Regents Professional Diploma in the specified occupation, and create a tax credit of \$1,500 for each apprentice the participating employer sponsors.

- **(S6839)** Increasing transparency to help students and families make informed decisions about college and borrowing. Higher education institutions would be required to collect data and provide more detailed information on student retention and graduation rates, average amounts of federal and private student loan debt after graduation, and average earnings and employment metrics broken down by program of study.
- **(S6841)** Awarding a Community College Merit and Mobility Scholarship to high school students across the state who graduate within the top 20 percent of their class. Eligible students must attend a New York State community college and would receive \$1,000 per year for up to two years. Up to 1,000 scholarships would be awarded to new students every year.

Also, legislation co-sponsored by Senator Ortt would:

- **(S2129)** Restore New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for graduate students. In 2010, the state legislature eliminated TAP for all graduate degree programs. Many of today's jobs now require a Master's degree, but without the help of financial aid, the cost of graduate school is too expensive for many. Since the program's elimination, it's been increasingly difficult for students to further their education and obtain a graduate degree. This bill would provide students with access to tuition assistance and make them more competitive in today's job market.

Additionally, during the last week of the legislative session, the Senate Majority passed a bill (S7573), co-sponsored by Senator Ortt, that would raise the net taxable income eligible for TAP awards from \$80,000 to \$100,000, raise the minimum TAP award to \$1,000 and adjust the formula for awards. Other bills that recently passed the Senate include the Help Individuals

Reach Employment (HIRE) program (S7646), and the NY-ELECTS program that would provide loan forgiveness or scholarship awards to eligible students.