Finding the best ways to prepare for college
Going to college is a momentous undertaking for students and their families, but there are many factors to consider – especially in today’s financial climate. Here and on the following pages, ‘The University Magazine’ takes a look at some of the key issues.

A quality college education requires a significant investment.

Annual tuition and fees at the nation’s private, four-year colleges averaged $25,143 for the current school year, according to a report by College Board, a non-profit higher education organization. Tuition at the most expensive institutions runs more than $40,000 per year. At RIT, tuition for the current year is $27,624. Why so much?

Because it costs a significant amount of money to provide a wide array of programs, attract and keep outstanding faculty, purchase and maintain equipment, and build and operate the facilities that define a top-tier technological university.

“The tuition dollar is the major source of funding to underwrite the expense of academic and recreational facilities and programs that define a well-rounded university,” says James Watters, senior vice president, Finance and Administration. Tuition covers approximately half of RIT’s operating budget, which totals $571 million for the current fiscal year.

This year, the financial picture is more complicated than ever. Universities – like businesses and individuals – have lost substantial portions of their wealth due to the global financial crisis. Public funds and private donations are increasingly uncertain as the crisis continues. And tuition income will be impacted if enrollment declines as families face loss of income due to unemployment and other factors.

“We have not been untouched by the current economic crisis,” says President Bill Destler. While enrollment is at an all-time high and applications to RIT from prospective students remain strong, the value of the endowment has dropped by more than 20 percent and New York state is considering reductions in a number of programs that support RIT students and programs.

Destler has outlined a number of responses to the financial crisis, including:

• A proposed tuition increase in the range of 3.5 percent to 4.5 percent for the 2009-2010 academic year.
• A freeze on salaries for faculty, staff and administrators.
• Proposed spending reductions for each division for the rest of this year and into next year.
• Creation of a significant contingency fund in next year’s budget to protect the institution from unforeseen fiscal circumstances.

Earlier, RIT implemented some changes that should bring significant savings, says Vice President Watters. Beginning this year, the university is self-insuring the medical division for the rest of this year and into next year.

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James Watters
Senior vice president, Finance and Administration

“Even in tough times.”

RIT recognizes the importance of providing financial aid for students, which totaled more than $92 million in the current year.

“It’s essential to maintain financial aid at a significant level,” Watters says. “The students that we recruit are highly mobile because they are high achievers. They have options. We need to provide the kind of financial packages that the competition is providing.”

Universities with large endowments have greater interest earnings to fund student aid.

RIT’s endowment – now about $540 million – is low for a university of its size and global scope and far below peer universities including Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute ($800 million), Carnegie Mellon ($1.1 billion), University of Rochester ($1.3 billion), and Cornell ($5.4 billion). Endowments – funds that comprise an institution’s wealth – typically take the form of an investment portfolio that, historically, generates income.

“When you look at the financial resources of the university’s endowment, they’re insufficient to truly meet the need that the collective families of our students have in terms of financial aid,” says Watters. “So it puts great pressure on the operating budget to respond to those needs.”

RIT’s endowment saw regular growth over the years, reaching $671.5 million at mid-year 2008. It declined sharply in the past six months. RIT administrators are not expecting any quick turnaround.

“I’ve made an assumption in the planning of our models that through calendar year 2009, we are not expecting any significant recovery in the financial marketplace,” says Watters. “We expect that the endowment will essentially be flat, that the earnings on working capital will be under pressure and that the interest rate environment will still be relatively low.

“So, it speaks to the fact that for a while, we’ve got to be very, very diligent about spending our money wisely, advancing the good things that we’re doing and just not over-extending ourselves.”
Alumni who haven’t returned to RIT in a few years are invariably stunned to see the new buildings, expansive facilities and large numbers of students.

The size and bustle are the visible signs of RIT’s transformation. Less obvious to the naked eye are some equally impressive changes that illustrate RIT’s increased stature.

- RIT is now among the 15th largest private universities in the country, based on full-time undergraduate enrollment.
- Total enrollment reached an all-time record of 16,494 for fall 2008, up 3 percent from 2007.
- Among private universities, RIT is the nation’s third-largest producer of bachelor’s degrees in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and math).
- Since 1995, applications for admission (undergraduate including transfer students and graduate) have doubled, increasing from 10,607 to 21,223.

“The growth of RIT’s reputation has allowed us to expand our reach, both domestically and internationally,” says James Miller, senior vice president, Enrollment Management and Career Services. “The majority of our freshmen now come from out of state. And our student population is more diverse than ever before. Since 1997, 50 percent of the enrollment growth on the Rochester campus has been in African American, Asian American, Latino American, Native American and international students.”

At the same time, “We’ve also become increasingly selective,” says Miller. Fall 2008 brought the lowest freshman admission rate ever: Approximately 60 percent of prospective first-year students who applied were accepted.

That’s a big change from 1995, when 78 percent of freshmen applicants were accepted. RIT is now among the top 4 percent of U.S. institutions based on SAT scores.

While RIT officials are understandably cautious about predictions in the current uncertain financial situation, applications for fall 2009 were ahead of last year when the magazine went to press. The demand for higher education is likely to remain strong: More than 3.3 million high school students – the largest number in the nation’s history – will graduate this year. More than two-thirds are expected to go directly to college.

“Our reputation as a career-focused, technological institution with a well-known cooperative education program and wide range of programs is firmly established. But it is our emerging brand that is making RIT an even more attractive choice for students and their families,” says Miller. “While retaining an emphasis on careers and technology, we are also emphasizing creativity and innovation, becoming more global, and creating a greater sense of community.

President Bill Destler believes RIT’s unique blend of programs prepares students to become the innovative leaders the world needs. “The future health and wealth of nations will depend on ambidextrous problem solvers – professionals who are critical and creative thinkers,” he says. Later this spring, RIT will open a Student Innovation Center that will serve as a showcase and workspace for innovation-related, multidisciplinary projects and activities involving all programs and disciplines.

Miller notes that many of RIT’s 100,000-plus alumni are helping to bring qualified students to RIT. Through the Alumni Admissions Volunteer Program, alumni can host hometown interviews in the fall or represent RIT at a college fair. During the past year, 210 alumni participated in the volunteer program, and the group is growing.

Alumni also help by getting the word about RIT to potential students, including friends and family members. Applicants

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RIT’s growth goes far beyond bricks
There are a number of sources and types of money for college. RIT’s Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships helps students and families sort it out. “The counselors in the office are always ready to help families with questions or financial concerns,” says Verna Hazen, assistant vice president and director of financial aid and scholarships.

The office plays an important role in the lives of thousands of students and their families: More than 75 percent of RIT’s full-time students receive some kind of financial assistance each year.

RIT has a long history of providing financial support to qualified students regardless of their families’ economic circumstances, says Hazen. This year, RIT is providing more than $92 million in institutionally funded assistance to students.

In recent months, the economic downturn has led to concerns about the availability of college funding. Over the course of the current school year, a number of students have requested and received additional institutionally funded scholarships.

“Many students and parents work very hard to provide for college costs,” says Hazen. “In this economy, the need for assistance can be beyond what those families can provide simply by working harder. That’s when we need to be able to step in and provide some relief.”

RIT helps in several ways:

- For undergraduate students, merit scholarships are awarded in recognition of outstanding academic and extracurricular achievements, regardless of a student’s financial need. These scholarships are awarded based on a review of information provided to the Office of Undergraduate Admissions as part of the admission process.

- For graduate students, many scholarships and assistantships are awarded by the academic department at the time of admission on the basis of academic excellence.

- Need-based financial aid is awarded to undergraduate and graduate students who demonstrate financial need based on information a student and his or her family provide on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The expected family contribution toward educational expenses is based on a government-approved formula. The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships determines a student’s eligibility for RIT, federal and other financial aid programs based on financial need.

- In addition, about 8,000 students work at part-time jobs on campus each year and RIT’s cooperative education program offers students the opportunity to earn substantial salaries that can be used to help pay for part of their education.

As the financial crisis continues, the picture for state and federally funded aid programs appears relatively stable, Hazen says. The recent Economic Stimulus bill included increases in tuition tax credits for middle income families and an increase in the federal Pell Grant program for students who demonstrate a high level of financial need. Spring 2008 legislation also expanded the availability of federal loans for students and parents.

The bottom line? Financial aid is critical to student success, and scholarship support is more important than ever.

“There is no better way to demonstrate our commitment to students’ success than to assist them in financing their education,” says James Miller, senior vice president, Enrollment Management and Career Services. “Every gift of scholarship support makes a big difference in the lives of our students.”

Information on RIT’s scholarships and financial aid can be found at www.rit.edu/financialaid.

As he approaches graduation in May, Student Government President Ed Wolf considers himself fortunate.

“If I was starting now, I’m not sure I could do it,” says the computer engineering major from Connecticut.

His father, a union electrician, has experienced layoffs of a month or more in each of the past five years. To devote time to Student Government, Wolf made the decision to give up his student job. He’s used salary from his co-op jobs toward his final year’s tuition.

“I’ve had to make sacrifices,” says Wolf. There’s little doubt that higher education is worth some sacrifices, even in these uncertain times. College grads have many more career opportunities and they make more money than high school graduates. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, annual salaries for people with master’s degrees average $72,800 and people with bachelor’s degrees earn an average of $57,000 annually, while the annual pay for high school grads averages $31,000.

Unemployment rates are higher for high school grads, averaging 4.4 percent in 2007, twice that of bachelor’s degree graduates (2.2 percent). The unemployment rate for workers with master’s degrees was 1.8 percent in 2007, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The downside of higher education is the cost: About 60 percent of students borrow to fund their education and the typical bachelor’s degree graduate leaves college owing more than $22,000. Average debt rose 18 percent between 2000-01 and 2006-07 (figures adjusted for inflation), according to the CollegeBoard organization.

Early in 2009, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Job Outlook projected that the overall average salary offer made to bachelor’s degree graduates this spring would be about $49,300, holding steady with last year’s average.

Wolf sees this as an important time to go to college because the world has such great need for educated people, especially those who bring innovation and creativity to the workplace. He believes Generation X and Generation Y – his peers – embrace change and are ready “to learn from history, and make our own history.”

The world can’t afford to waste the potential of its young people.

“If somebody has the ability and the passion to learn, but simply can’t afford it – that’s just not right,” says Wolf.

“Higher education is an opportunity that shouldn’t be limited to those who can afford it.”
New programs expand on RIT’s unique blend of disciplines

A native of Fresno, Calif., fourth-year student Nathan Green says adjusting to winters in Rochester is a minor obstacle compared to the challenges presented by his computer science curriculum. But he’s definitely not complaining.

“Every project is a puzzle to be solved,” explains Green, “and it’s a lot of fun. There can be a lot of frustration with CS projects, but when you succeed, you succeed big.”

Perhaps it’s that level of fulfillment that consistently makes computer science the hottest academic program at RIT, based on total enrollment. At the start of fall quarter, 648 undergraduates were studying CS in the B. Thomas Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences. That’s nearly 200 students more than mechanical engineering technology, RIT’s second most heavily enrolled program. Information technology, mechanical engineering, and applied networking and system administration round out the top five.

These are among the so-called STEM disciplines, related to science, technology, engineering and math. Jeremy Haefner, provost and senior vice president of academic affairs, says STEM remains the “cornerstone” of RIT’s academic experience. That commitment is driving the recent development of new STEM programs in clinical research management, biomedical engineering and chemical engineering. New undergraduate degrees in philosophy and journalism have also been added in the past year.

Haefner is also quick to point out the popularity and success of programs in the creative arts. The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences attracts top-performing undergraduate and graduate students to RIT into nationally ranked programs including design, photography and glass.

At the graduate level, business administration, offered through RIT’s E. Philip Saunders College of Business, has the largest enrollment, followed by computer science and information technology. Criminal justice is on tap to become RIT’s newest master’s degree. Expanding the university’s commitment to graduate studies is a high priority.

“The growth of RIT’s graduate studies portfolio, particularly our Ph.D. programs, represents a significant leap toward building our national reputation,” states Haefner. “As they take off, RIT really takes off.”

RIT recently launched sustainability as the university’s sixth doctoral degree, joining existing doctorate programs in astrophysics, color science, computing and information sciences, imaging science and microsystems engineering.

Still, RIT administrators recognize many good students arrive on campus not knowing what discipline to pursue. For these individuals, planning is underway for the development of a “University Studies” program. “Its objective is to provide a programmatic framework that will welcome the potential or current RIT student who is not certain about what field to choose or the student who might need to change majors,” Haefner explains.

The provost believes University Studies is critical to attracting more top-tier students to RIT while also helping to retain those individuals already on campus.

Ultimately, for many, the choice of program comes down to career prospects. Nathan Green, who is pursuing a dual B.S./M.S. degree, has already enjoyed the opportunity to participate in several co-ops. He feels good about his selection.

“Getting out of RIT with a degree in computer science, I’m not worried about getting a job.”

Paul Stella ’03