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## Editorial | Tax proposal ignores the intangible

By

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State Rep. Denise Provost (D-Somerville) is co-sponsoring Massachusetts House Bill No. 2759, which would effectively revoke the non-profit tax-exempt status of all independent colleges and universities in Massachusetts. Provost stated that her decision to back the bill can be directly traced to what she sees as the imbalance of benefits, fiscal and otherwise, between her home community of Somerville and its resident independent university — Tufts. We at the Daily can certainly understand some of the concerns Provost has brought to light. But we also understand that community benefits encompass more than mere tax revenue.


In a letter to the Somerville Journal, Provost states that the university's historic resistance to giving Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOTs) to Somerville, as is customary of many non-profits, has deprived the community of compensation for what the Somerville Assessor's Office has estimated would be \$5.5 million a year in tax revenue. In addition, she alleges that many of the university's outreach programs to the local community are largely ineffective and benefit the school as much as, if not more than, surrounding neighborhoods.

While it is true that the university does not specifically give PILOTs to its host communities, in 2004 President Bacow and Somerville Mayor Joe Curtatone signed an agreement stating that Tufts would make a monetary contribution of \$1.25 million each year until 2013, when the contract expires. Rep. Provost implies that the school's refusal to specifically designate these payments as "PILOTs" indicates a possible unwillingness to continue them past the 2013 expiration date, despite assurances from the university that a renewal of the contract is likely.

Though it may be true that the university pays less in taxes than do for-profit institutions not exempt under state law, Tufts' impact cannot be measured by taxes alone. The university employs over 300 of Somerville's residents and sets aside an annual sum of \$300,000 specifically for meeting the need-based aid requirements of Somerville students. And, while the university may be resistant to yearly PILOTs, it donates money to the local communities in times of financial strain. Tufts also benefits its host communities indirectly, most notably by attracting students to Somerville who are not only willing to spend money but also willing to volunteer their time and resources to invest in their new hometown.

Tufts students are an invaluable customer base. They contribute greatly to local businesses, many of which are small and independently owned. The Tufts freshman orientation schedule now includes a "Discover Davis" trip in which groups of freshmen tour Davis Square and learn about the local restaurants and shops that they can frequent. In addition, many of the university's students volunteer with organizations like Tufts Literacy Corps and Jumpstart, giving back to the community directly by tutoring local children and working with nearby schools. Tufts' Leonard Carmichael Society provides SAT tutoring for high school students and organizes the annual Kids' Day celebration for local children.

Rep. Provost's support for this bill and her attacks on the university display a refusal to recognize the benefits Tufts provides to the local community and an unwillingness to fix areas of imbalance with more logical and more creative methods. She is opting instead for a facile solution that would inhibit Tufts' ability to provide many of its less tangible but nonetheless positive contributions.

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