Public Universities and State-level Funding Advocacy

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From a panel discusion with
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The future of higher education in the Midwest will be determined by a host of factors, the predominant of which will be funding. Changes in revenue sources over the last decade have made higher education more reliant on tuition than on state funding. While the State of Kansas has increased funding for higher education through operating grants, those increases have not been enough to cover the increased costs of higher education.

It is important to look carefully at the changes in funding for Kansas higher education institutions over the past ten years. In 1996, 51% of the university funding was from the State General Fund while only 14% came from tuition revenue.[1]. In 2006, less than 30% of the funding arrives from the State General Fund while more than 24% of the funding is tuition related.[2]

The State of Kansas has worked hard to guarantee that promises made in the Higher Education Reorganization Act of 1999 were kept. In addition, there have been significant increases in the operating grants that Regents institutions receive. These increases have produced a four year trend where both tuition and state funding have increased by 15%.[3] The State of Kansas has done much to work to establish more funding for higher education during tough budget times, but the money the state has provided still falls short of many needed services at the Universities.

Financial Successes in Higher Education Budgeting:

Over the past five years, there have been many legislative successes aimed to assist higher education communities and provide additional funding and infrastructure for the future. Some highlights are:

- 2001/2002 New Facility Funding for a $68 million for a Life Sciences building at the University of Kansas and $40 million for a Homeland Security Building at Kansas State University
- 2004, 2005, 2006 included the completion of the three year commitment to keep the funding increases in the Higher Education Reorganization Act of 1999
- 2002 established the beginning of Operating Grants for Regents Institutions which allows them greater flexibility with the spending of funds
- 2004 Kansas Economic Growth Act
- 2004 Bioscience Authority
- 2006 investment in the five year $25 million commitment for Cancer Center at the University of Kansas
- Do you want to add this year's Tuition Ownership changes that will be dedicated to deferred maintenance?

Political Realities of Legislative Budgeting

While there have been many success for higher education over the past few years, they have not been achieved without a tremendous amount of work. The support for higher education in the Legislature has changed over the years to the point that in 2005, the House of Representatives in Kansas supported major budget cuts to Regents institutions as a way to cover the cost of other items in the budget. While this initiative did not become law, it highlights the fact that higher education is at a crossroads in the arena of funding.

Kansas like many Midwestern states has a "Citizen Legislature." While many Legislators view their responsibilities as a full time job, the salary alone is not enough to be their only source of income. Most Kansas Legislators make just under $20,000 per year through their Legislative pay. The effect of the long hours and limited pay for a Citizen Legislature has changed the look of the Kansas Legislature.

The face of Legislatures across the Midwest has been plagued by increased turnover and term limits in some states. Long-term relationships that once solidified a majority support for higher education now require much more outreach as new legislators have been elected. Long term funding promises like the Kansas 1999 Higher Education Reorganization Act are important steps for the future, but hard to implement when new legislators are elected long after a funding promise has been established. The outreach to these new legislators by higher education institutions is of paramount importance if funding commitments are to be continued.

The changing face of the Kansas Legislature has been highlighted by a public organization that is working to lobby legislators on the importance of higher education in Kansas. The Citizens for Higher Education released their 2006 voting records for the Kansas Legislature in July of 2006 and the numbers highlight the growing divide among pro-higher education legislators and anti-higher education

legislators in Kansas. In their initial report, 61 members of the 125 member House of Representatives received an "A" or "B" grade for their votes on higher education issues in the 2005 and 2006 Legislative Sessions. In contrast, 56 of the 125 members of the Kansas House of Representatives received an "F" in a comprehensive analysis of 43 different votes taken during the 2005 and 2006 Legislative Sessions.[4] This type of accountability is important for voters to see how their Legislators rank on important higher education issues.

Senator Jean Schodorf of Wichita and Reggie Robinson from the Kansas Board of Regents highlighted the fact that continued outreach by the University staff and administrators will be the key to the future of higher education funding. Without the hard work to build stronger relationships with legislators, the fight for additional higher education funding will continue to be an uphill battle.

References

1. State of Kansas, Comparison Report: The Governor's Budget Report with Legislative Authorizations for Fiscal Year 2007. Kansas Division of Budget, 2006.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Citizens for Higher Education Inc., "56 Kansas Legislators Get Failing Grade on Higher Education Report Card." www.kansashighereducation.org, July 10, 2006