

Showing Our Value: Fighting Declining Support for Higher Education

By Merodie A. Hancock

Direct state support across the nation for public higher education over the past 25 years has been waning. In a 2014 AASCU *Policy Matters* paper, Daniel Hurley notes, “State appropriations per full-time equivalent (FTE) student has declined 30 percent.”

This trend continues. Further, public narrative is calling into question the value, mostly via an earnings capacity cost-benefit analysis, of higher education. Moreover, results of a recent Pew Research Center survey found that there is growing doubt about the value of higher education.

Given this environment, it is more important than ever that the public colleges and universities in this country develop and promulgate solid defenses for our continued existence now and in the future.

Public higher education is rooted in the notion of opening doors to all qualified students who are willing to take on the challenges involved in becoming educated citizens. These students will be far more likely to achieve economic independence, thereby enriching their own lives, the lives of their families and, ultimately, bolstering their collective communities. However, in a world of growing scrutiny, enhanced regulation and tightening state budgets, we must do more than simply provide overarching statements of value.

We, as public presidents, need to take every opportunity possible to demonstrate to elected officials:

- How investment in public higher education expands the earning potential for their constituents, and in turn the tax base, both through the students we graduate and the citizens we employ;
- The central role played by public colleges in building and sustaining our communities through free or low cost educational, health, cultural and other programming or services; and
- Our sound and transparent fiscal stewardship of taxpayers’ dollars and student tuition.

We all have to advocate for the value of public education overall, in addition to the unique value of our own institutions. In New York State for instance, we are fortunate to have strong state financial aid support for our full-time traditional students. However, for working, part-time and returning student populations, there is still a case to be made and I continue to educate and advocate for these students.

As public college presidents, we need to demonstrate all of this through cogent and consistent messages via various mediums, including direct advocacy, social media, and activating our alumni base. In addition, we need to take advantage of any and all opportunities for frank conversations with our legislators and their staffers, followed up with proposals for realistic solutions to address the concerns of our elected officials.

At colleges and universities, we tend to plan in three to five year periods, but elected officials operate in the length of the legislative session and their term of office. Proposed solutions need to match our advocacy with the immediacy of their decision-making—knowing that results will also need to be readily apparent. Therefore, presidents must have their message and data ready at all times, leverage any opportunities that arrive, and be ready to move their campuses at the speed of the legislative season. **P**

Merodie A. Hancock is president of SUNY Empire State College.