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ADMINISTRATION

The Challenge of Restoring the 'Public' to 'Public Higher Education'

By *Eric Kelderman* | DECEMBER 11, 2015

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Advocates for public colleges know a degree has value beyond increased wages for their graduates. Now they are trying to convince everyone else.

How to make that argument is the theme here at the annual conference of higher-education lobbyists representing public two- and four-year colleges — members of the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. Members of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education also attended.

'We can't forget about the overarching public good of higher education. The public good has fallen off the agenda.'

Central to the discussions was the growing movement to more broadly define the value of public colleges, which for more than a decade has focused on the financial payoff of earning a degree.

"America is losing her way on higher education," Thomas W. Ross, president of the University of North Carolina system, said on Wednesday in a speech to the lobbyists.

The discussion of higher education's value has become too focused on metrics, return on investment, and work-force preparation, said Mr. Ross, who is being forced to step down from his position at the end of the year.

The result is that colleges are increasingly described more like factories than educational enterprises, said Mr. Ross, with a mandate to produce more products at a lower price.

"We can't forget about the overarching public good of higher education," said Mr. Ross. "The public good has fallen off the agenda."

The Economic-Benefits Pitfall

Colleges themselves have some responsibility for the state of the debate.

For at least a decade, leaders and advocates of public higher education have highlighted the individual economic benefits of earning a college degree. That reasoning has largely taken hold among both policy makers and the public, who see college as an imperative for getting a good job.

The argument that a state's residents make

more money when they are well educated is meant to protect legislators' appropriations as an investment in the state's economic future. But it has not, in most cases, helped persuade them to increase spending on higher education.

By highlighting the increased earnings of college graduates, the argument has made it easy for state lawmakers to conclude that individuals should pay for more of their education and to justify budget cuts in public higher education.

Instead, by highlighting the increased earnings of college graduates, the argument has made it easy for state lawmakers to conclude that individuals should pay for more of their education, said Mr. Ross and others, and to justify budget cuts in public higher education.

Budget cuts are not the only fallout from a focus on individual financial benefits, Jeremi Suri, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, said during a presentation at the conference.

"Students come in and want to learn interesting things," Mr. Suri said. "Sadly, they are told by their parents and everyone else, Just study to get a job."

"The message to them is, Go get what you can get, because if you don't get it someone else will," Mr. Suri said.

Minutiae and Meetings

Mr. Suri said the first responsibility of those in higher education is to know their history and mission and to live up to its ideals. Too much time and energy is being spent in academe on minutiae and pointless meetings.

In addition, he said, state legislators need to visit campuses for more than football games.

But the problem college advocates face as they try to shift the conversation to the public good is that there is little agreement on the means and measures to show those benefits.

In contrast, state and federal governments have established several ways to link wages to college degrees and, in some cases, have criticized majors they perceive as having little economic value.

The associations at the meeting have begun various efforts to change how college success is measured. In particular, the land-grant-university group has started the Post-Collegiate Outcomes Initiative to examine both the public and the personal economic and social capital that is generated by higher education.

In an era of increased accountability, higher education needs to include both perspectives, Jonathan R. Alger, president of James Madison University, told attendees.

"Our philosophy majors do a lot with the skill sets we give them," he said. "We need to tell that story."

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