

KEEPING WATCH: The Illinois Board of Higher Education

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Most faculty try to keep abreast of things in their unit and to a lesser degree the college and campus. On occasion the focus is on what is happening in Springfield that might affect higher education. One key intermediary between the institution and the legislature and Governor is the Illinois Board of Higher Education. It bears watching because it directly impacts the institution and thus its faculty, staff and students. Public campuses establish their own mission but the specifics of that mission in terms of focus are negotiated with the IBHE. Private institutions are particularly sensitive to appropriations for the Illinois Student Assistance Program.

Appointed by the Governor, the IBHE has an office and staff in Springfield. Among other things it reviews—and cuts—budgets submitted by the four-year public institutions. It sets and recommends to the Governor and legislature the higher education budget including funds for community colleges, the monetary awards programs and various grants. (Although included in the higher education budget, appropriations to the state university retirement system are set by law.) It approves degree programs and operating authority for public and private institutions in Illinois. Faculty may not know much about the IBHE but administrators know it well since they must deal with it in a variety of respects.

Three current initiatives of the IBHE are a revision of *The Illinois Commitment*, a study of the four-year public universities in terms of Priorities, Productivity, and Accountability via an appointed committee, and formulating the FY'06 budget request.

The Illinois Commitment. The Board promulgated *The Illinois Commitment* in February 1999 as a strategic plan to guide higher education to 2010. It set as the goals of higher education: contributing to economic development; partnering with K-12 to improve teaching and learning; ensuring affordability; assuring access and diversity; offering high quality education; and improving productivity, cost effectiveness, and accountability.

Responding in part to concerns of the Faculty Advisory Council (FAC) that the document did not reflect the manifold dimensions and contributions of higher education to Illinois citizens, a review of the *Commitment* was undertaken during the last year. The FAC stressed that the overarching role of higher education was to enhance the quality of life in Illinois and does so in many ways that go far beyond the education students receive in the classroom.

At its October 5 meeting, the IBHE adopted a series of revisions to the *Commitment* while continuing much of its original thrust. The *Commitment* gained a preface stating that it “is premised on the conviction that higher education provides the foundation for Illinois’ future by enhancing the social, economic, and civic well-being of the state and its residents.” The six goals became a policy framework with short- and long-term objectives articulated. Rather than being a static document, these objectives will change in response to changes in the broader environment. While adopting the proposed changes, members of the Board called for greater attention to the given to civic involvement of students and ethics, issues to be addressed in future action. I would like to see a greater stress on the arts and creativity and use of the term “enhanced quality of life.”

However, it is clear that this is a significantly improved document over its predecessor although some in higher education would prefer to have the entire document discarded with a return to emphasis upon the individual missions of the institutions.

Priorities, Productivity and Accountability Committee. This committee was established in part due to budget stringencies to enable the Board to examine cost and return issues. The committee has formed two subcommittees: one to examine issues related to Board and institutional authority to change missions and focus and to examine program quality with a particular reference to online and proprietary education. It may also take up issues of faculty productivity and workload. The other subcommittee will examine issues related to regulatory relief from the burden of extensive reports and current accountability processes to see if duplication can be eliminated and more effective and efficient means identified to demonstrate accountability. The committee now plans to provide recommendations to the Board in late spring.

Budget. The Board staff is holding a series of meetings with institutions as the FY'06 budget is being built. Clearly the state has continuing negative budget pressures that will constrain budget recommendations. With regard to this year's current budget, the IBHE deserves praise for holding to its recommended budget in the face of the Governor's efforts to reduce the budget. The Board, colleges and universities, and individuals worked with the legislature to achieve what was essentially a no-growth budget, a meaningful accomplishment given the Governor's efforts to slash state funds going into the higher education budget even after the sharp reductions of the previous two years. State funding for public universities is down 14.7% from FY'90 to FY'05 adjusted for inflation. Inflation adjusted funding for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission in that period rose 32%.

All three of these substantive areas of concern merit a watchful eye during the coming year.