

Higher Education Summit

By Leo Welch

The first Higher Education Summit ever held in Illinois took place on November 9, 2005 at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Chicago. The meeting was organized by the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

The theme of the conference was "Higher Education: Why It Matters." This issue was the main topic for an audience of 200 higher education leaders, members of the general assembly, state government officials, business leaders, students and faculty. Apparently higher education must convince the general public and in turn our state legislators that higher education is important because state financial support for higher has diminished since FY 2001.

Five panels were convened with a main speaker and a panel of responders. The common statements from legislators, as one might expect, are Illinois does not have sufficient revenue to meet current financial demands and K-12 education is the current priority. Legislatures know full well that colleges and universities have the ability to enhance revenue by increasing tuition and fees and that is exactly what they have been forced to do.

Although each of the five panels had been assigned specific topics, there was in fact only one common theme: what direction is the U.S. going in light of decreasing support by both state and federal government for higher education and how can the higher education community convince the general public as well as legislators to return higher education to a national high priority.

The concern of affordability is reflected in Measuring Up 2004, the national report card on higher education. In the 2004 report card Illinois is given a grade of D on affordability. The report states that "Illinois has consistently provided a high level of need-based financial aid for students, but recent policy decisions have begun to undermine this historic high level of performance."

The impact on students was placed in a personal perspective by Adam Howell, a student from Eastern Illinois University, when he related in one panel discussion that many of his student colleagues are forced to work the equivalent of full-time jobs to meet the increasing costs of obtaining a college degree.

Although many of the speakers provided detailed analysis of a variety of issues many of the spontaneous comments were revealing. A few of the comments were as follows.

"There is no light at the end of the tunnel" — Senator Miguel delValle

"Due to revenue constraints, do not expect any help from the General Assembly" — Representative Rich Meyers

"You must do a better job in explaining the role of higher education to the general public" — Representative Kevin McCarthy

"Why should the next state dollar be spent on higher education when there are other competing needs?" — Elliot Regenstein, Director of Education Reform, Office of the Governor

"We will look for educated employees elsewhere if the U.S. cannot provide them." — Richard Stephens, Senior Vice President, The Boeing Company

"Public higher education should explore other sources of revenue" — Senator Rick Winkel

The last panel of the day was entitled "Where Do We Go From Here?" which raised the question of an action plan. Although this summit did not develop specific criteria for an action plan, one of the speakers, Stanley Ikenberry, President Emeritus of the University of Illinois, part of a national coalition of higher education associations and institutions called Solutions for the Future. They are preparing to launch a national dialogue in 2006 about the challenges faced by society and the role of higher education.

The focus of the coalition will be on the "public good" provided by higher education and the attempt to return higher education to a priority, not only in Illinois, but to the nation as a whole.

The challenge to us all was stated by the President of Roosevelt University, Charles Middleton. He said "If this summit is held again next year, I predict we will report back that nothing significant will have happened." Will the public be convinced that higher education needs more support or will we be in this same place next year? A coordinated and effective message must be generated, or his prediction will indeed come true.