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A GUBERNATORIAL VIEW OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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Public colleges and universities will face more of the same in the next two years -- imposed austerity.

A survey of 35 governors, conducted by the Center for the Study of Educational Finance at Illinois State University, reveals the general gubernatorial belief that public higher education is already adequately funded. This is especially true among the governors of the states with the highest population concentrations. Those executives from the less populated states seem less certain about the adequacy of educational funding at all levels. They are more open to debate on the needs of the educational community.

The governors close ranks on many key issues affecting higher education and state government. They foresee, for example, an improved economy at the state level with unemployment figures down and personal income figures up. Most of the governors predict an increase in state revenues in the next two years. This, they believe, will lessen some of the pressure on state treasuries and state budgets. Despite this, there is little reason to believe that they and members of their state legislatures will lift the austerity imposed by recent years of recession.

Only five of the governors talk seriously of increasing state spending. Most of them seem more interested in emphasizing greater governmental accountability, increased efficiency, tighter budgetary controls, and the elimination of bureaucracy.

More than half of the respondents anticipate some reduction in the number of government employees, and they are careful not to exclude institutions of higher learning from their considerations. Where there appears to be a possible budget surplus, and several states are anticipating one, governors talk of the attractiveness of reducing taxes or offering refunds to taxpayers.

A careful analysis of the gubernatorial questionnaires suggests that American higher education faces increased budgetary scrutiny from state agencies under the popular banner of accountability. It does appear that there will be fewer severe budget cuts, which should encourage certain embattled educational administrators. It is also apparent that gubernatorial opinion favors increased financial assistance for students, vocational education programming, and the health professions.

Significantly, only 8 of the 35 governors think that public higher education in the United States has been unfairly treated in terms of financial support. More than a third of the governors believe that public colleges and universities are overbuilt in terms of academic programs and capital outlay. They frequently point to projected declines in the number of college-age students in the early 1980s. They also say that higher education has more than enough programs; the real challenge, in their opinion, is to restructure those programs in such a way as to assure greater service to society and the economy.

Just eleven of the governors sense public concern about the future of higher education. A majority contends that American higher education remains a "non-issue" in terms of the political system, and does not see this changing in the immediate future.

Only eight of the governors say that public higher education can expect significant increases in state support, and five of these strongly hint that increased support will come only for specific programming designed to meet the needs of business and industry.

Three fourths of the governors express concern about the future of private higher education, favoring some increase in state aid for private colleges and universities. Convinced that private institutions are an essential part of the total system of higher education, they favor direct aid to the students, not to the institutions. They advocate continuance of private higher education because of its role in offering institutional alternatives, student choice and needed program diversity.

The survey offers little comfort to faculty in public colleges and universities with more than two thirds of the governors saying that faculty members are adequately compensated, especially when compared to other state employees. Most of the respondents feel that certain faculty members are overpaid as compared to others, and that a more definite measure of "worth" is needed. Five governors say that faculty members in their states are not adequately paid and that adjustments will have to be made if their institutions are to remain truly competitive. Most say that future increments most likely will be based on cost-of-living factors.

All but two of the chief executives feel that present tuition levels are fair and do not deny reasonable access to public colleges and universities. A third of the governors agree that it is important to have tuition rates reviewed periodically to assure

continuance of access for low-income students. More than half of the officials contend that their states are providing substantial financial assistance for deserving students. Several argue, however, that tuition rates should be increased at the professional schools since the students enrolled there will realize significantly higher levels of income after graduation.

The governors are divided on the question of how significant students are as a political factor. Most of them believe, however, that young people on the campuses could become a major force if they ever were to organize. Lowering of the voting age has not impacted the political scene as many thought that it would, several governors contend.

In the opinion of 22 of the governors, the academic community does not control elections, but it can be influential. These governors are unanimous in thinking that academicians are opinion leaders, and deserve their special attention; but they further believe that members of the academic community are poorly organized and thus minimize their possible impact. It is implied that support from the academic community carries unusual prestige, which is something that most politicians value. Nineteen of the governors admit to courting the academic community with some measure of success.

Two thirds of the governors find the public attitude toward higher education linked with the institutions' ability to effectively place young people in meaningful areas of employment after graduation. They report a public preoccupation with the

employability of today's college graduates. Institutions which have ignored economic trends and needs are in trouble, or on the verge of trouble, according to eleven of the state leaders. An overwhelming majority believes that the time has arrived for institutions of higher learning to effectively state their cases for continued support in "understandable terms," ones with which the average citizen can readily identify. This statement need not signal a retreat from traditional academic values, several of the governors are quick to point out. What it does mean, they say, is greater recognition of public attitudes and societal needs.

With few exceptions the governors are highly supportive of public higher education, and they go "to bat" for the value of the four-year college degree. They would like to see the baccalaureate evaluated on more than just economic grounds. They would like to see its social value stressed much more by the academic community. They express concern about what they perceive to be "growing misunderstanding" about the value of a college education, and they fear that public misunderstanding can result in a loss of public support for colleges and universities.

When asked on what grounds public higher education should justify its future, the governors offer a wide range of ideas. Some of the more commonly held ideas:

1. Public colleges and universities must move to clarify their roles and missions in measurable terms, and they then should proceed to work toward those ends.
2. Institutions of higher learning should no longer attempt to be all things to all people. Rather, they should specialize in given areas of need and then demonstrate unquestioned quality of programs.

3. Higher education should do appreciably more in assuring our society of an informed citizenry, especially in areas such as basic economics and citizenship.
4. Public colleges and universities should move to provide significantly more job-entry skills in order to enhance the value of a college education.
5. Institutions of higher education should devote more of their research effort for the purposes of improving the quality of life for all of our citizens.
6. As a group, colleges and universities should offer qualified individuals the opportunity to fulfill legitimate personal and professional aspirations.