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On Asking the Right Questions

By Ken Andersen

Educators know that asking the right question is essential to eliciting a useful response from students or helping a committee use time wisely and derive useful conclusions. Asking the wrong question(s) can have disastrous effects. Are the Governor and legislators asking the question, "Can we afford to support higher education at the levels being requested?" Perhaps they and Illinois need to ask a different question: Can the state of Illinois afford not to improve its level of support for higher education?

The Governor's emphases in the proposed FY'05 budget are K-12 education, health care, and public safety. The Governor has recommended a 5.9% decrease in state support (3% excluding SURS) for higher education although the publicity stresses that the "all funds budget" shows an increase due in large part to tuition increases. Yet, enrollments are at an all time high. Can the state afford these cuts on top of the last two years of severe cuts?

Higher education is no longer a luxury. It is not a choice. It is a necessity. Paul Lingenfelter in a recent presentation to the IBHE Faculty Advisory Council said, "knowledge and skill have become the most valuable resources in the world. Most developed countries are catching or surpassing the United States in degree attainment, and education has become essential to economic prosperity and mobility for communities and individuals." And for individuals, educational level is tied to such factors as improved health and quality of life.

If Illinois, indeed the nation, is to remain competitive in the international economy, a highly educated workforce is a sine qua non. As Alan Weber put it (USA Today, Jan 26, 2003), "The only way to have a future is to invent it. It makes little sense for politicians to bewail the loss of jobs. The real quest is for the next source of jobs and economic activity." "We're not going to get back the 3 million manufacturing jobs that have vanished from our economy." Higher education is part of the required infrastructure of economic viability in today's world, even more so in the future.

Universities are central to the research that produces new ideas leading to new products, new enterprises, new jobs. A higher education system that is the envy of the world not only is key to much of the research enterprise but also produces the individuals that can build it and build upon it. The two Nobel prizes at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign are one indication of the central role universities play in generating and disseminating knowledge. The daily work of educators in the classroom is another.

Educators at public and private institutions alike face daunting tasks:

- We are being asked to educate a larger and larger portion of the population.
- We are being asked through our institutions to help improve the quality of education provided in our elementary and secondary schools.
- We are being asked to educate a significantly more diverse student body despite a trend of diminishing constant dollar state support.
- We are being asked/told to hold down tuition increases while preparing for continued reduction in state support for higher education in the future.
- We are being asked to find new ways of ensuring access to a quality education at significantly less cost.
- We are being asked to avoid creating a sharply differentiated multiple-tiered system of educational quality within and between public and private education.

As educators we must respond to these challenges. But to respond we must have the support required to ensure that our higher education system does not place our students, our state, our nation at risk economically or politically or risk surrendering the American dream of an enhanced quality of life not just for ourselves but for all.

Ultimately Illinois and the nation must address the issue of a taxation level that does not support the essential shared needs of the state and country. There will always be waste and graft and efforts to eliminate them must be ongoing. But eliminating all waste and graft (defined by any reasonable standard) will not meet our needs. An increase in the state income tax and a reduction in the property tax as a means of supporting K-12 education have long been advocated in Illinois. That shift may depend upon the courts mandating it by ruling the current financing of public elementary and secondary schools illegal or unconstitutional. We may find an upturn in the economy will provide a temporary but not a permanent solution. We might move to a graduated tax in Illinois or alter the levels of the graduated national income tax. We might even consider extending sales taxes beyond goods—a much less dominant element in contemporary society—to services—a much more prominent feature of the information/service economy of the twenty-first century.

Yes, I have come to “understand” that taxes that help “them” are harmful—not just to the economy and to me but to “them” as well—while the taxes that serve my needs are “essential.” But one of the responsibilities of being educators is to help people understand the difficulty of defining a “them” in our community and understanding the breadth of my “needs” in a complex society.

Further, I remember Hume’s unhappy dictum (freely restated) that as human beings we underweight the long-term future and overvalue the short-term present. We and our legislators too rarely give proper weight to the long term. But one of the responsibilities of being educators is to value the long term and to demonstrate the necessity of weighting it more heavily than humans are wont to do.

Have the cuts in support of higher education including state scholarship support for students significantly and negatively impacted Illinois higher education? What is your experience in your classroom?

Can the state of Illinois afford not to improve its level of support for higher education?