

Update

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State Legislative Priorities, Policies, and Perceptions

Introduction

The GOP's stunning victory in the 1994 mid-term elections was just one consequence of an anti-incumbent mood that has swept much of the country in recent years. It also marked a dramatic turning point in the direction of American politics. For the first time in nearly four decades, the Republican party is now the majority coalition represented in the U.S. Congress, in state executive offices and among state legislatures. As the newly elected officials joined their like-minded counterparts in state legislatures, and executive offices across the country, they brought with them a revised agenda for state government and its institutions, including higher education.

Legislatures in many states, along with colleges and universities, face the daunting task of providing a high quality and affordable college education to a growing and more diverse group of students with, at best, constrained public resources. The consensus developing among policy makers, the higher education community, and the public alike is that meeting this challenge will require a fundamental *restructuring* of the way higher education is organized, delivered, financed, and evaluated. What remains far from resolved are the next steps — agreement on the nature, degree, and scope of reform and the actions required of all those with a stake in higher education to implement change.

About the Study

The National Education Association (NEA) commissioned Educational Systems Research in Littleton, Colorado to develop and conduct the state legislative Higher Education Issues Survey (HEIS). This report describes the findings of the HEIS drawn from in-depth telephone interviews conducted from February through August 1995 with 58 house and senate education committee chairs in 49 states (Wisconsin is not represented). The objectives are to offer crit-

ical information about state legislative higher education policy and to provide insights into the values and attitudes legislators hold about higher education. The NEA commissioned this study in order to provide its affiliates and others with a general background and a point of departure for further discussion.

It is important to point out that the report describes general patterns and trends drawn from the sum of legislators' responses. It should

not be assumed that all the findings will apply in any particular state. Instead the report seeks to reflect accurately and impartially the *collective* voice of state legislators. Most information about state legislative higher education issues is based on surveys of people other than legislators — campus liaisons, higher education officials, or legislative staff. This report is unique because it represents the perspectives of leading state lawmakers.

In many state legislatures, the changes in legislative control and the departure of many long-time legislators have meant the appointment of new committee chairs. In our survey of 58 legislators, 30 (54 percent) were serving in their first year as education committee chairs, although that did not necessarily mean they were newly elected to the legislature. Among the new committee chairs, the proportion of Republicans and Democrats is roughly equal, but they hold vastly different opinions on several key higher education issues. Following are some examples:

■ Republicans are more likely to support the construction of new campuses by a margin of almost 3 to 1 (20 percent to 7 percent).

■ Over half (54 percent) of Republicans believe that private colleges and universities should be

relied on more, while only 29 percent of their Democratic counterparts agree.

■ Some 76 percent of Republicans compared to 55 percent of Democrats agree faculty should teach more courses to meet enrollment demands.

■ By a margin of over two to one (68 percent to 33 percent) Republicans are more likely to say the current level of funding for higher education is adequate to meet current needs.

■ Almost twice as many Republicans (79 percent compared to 40 percent of Democrats) believe that the legislature in their states will take action in the next three to five years to link higher education funding to identified statewide priorities.

■ Republicans overwhelmingly (81 percent compared to 33 percent of Democrats) find information from taxpayers and constituents useful for informing their decisions about higher education.

■ None of the Republicans found media information helpful for informing policy making, while 43 percent of their Democratic counterparts found the media's information useful. It is worth noting, however, that although legislators' opinions are mixed as to the usefulness of media information, most are affected by the media's reporting of higher education, particularly if it is deemed negative.

In general, when asked to rate their position on various issues, the new Republican chairs tend to be far less neutral in their opinions than their Democratic counterparts. They view themselves as more "action-oriented" than the departing Democratic majority. Many of those who could be characterized as "action-oriented" leg-

islators are responding to what they perceive to be a mandate from a fiercely anti-tax, anti-spending public that is skeptical about the ability of government to solve its problems. The twin campaign promises to trim government and reduce taxes, on which most new Republican governors and state legislators were elected in 1994, reverberated throughout the 1995 legislative sessions. Almost half of all legislators (49 percent) said new tax cut proposals either are being seriously discussed or implemented this year. In many states, these proposals follow on the heels of tax and spending limitations previously put into place.

A Focus On Roles and Expectations for Higher Education

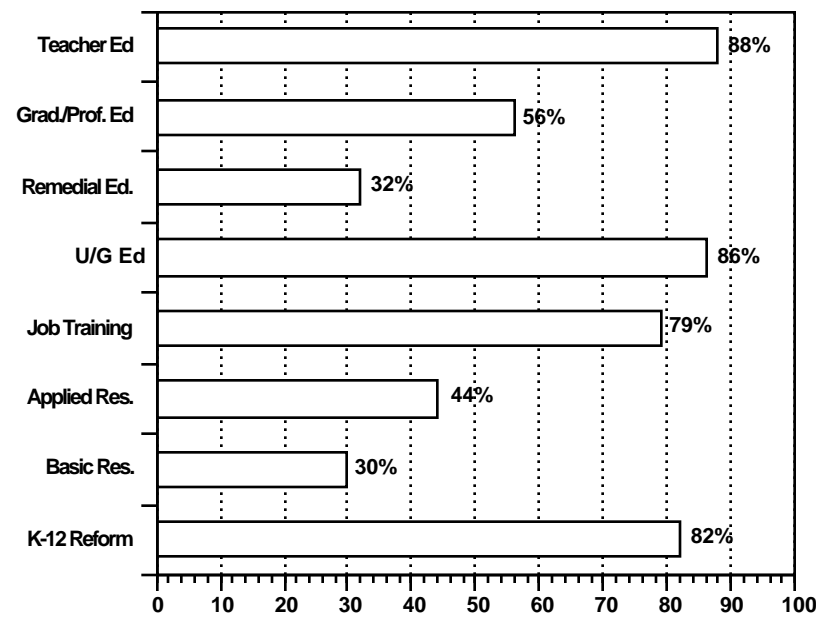
In many state legislatures, the economic recession and ensuing budget crises of the early 1990s served as a wake-up call to begin assess-

ing long-term state needs and priorities for a range of services. Higher education was no exception, as policy makers began asking more probing questions about its purposes and mission. State legislatures are setting about the task of clarifying what priority should be assigned to their various educational, research and service functions. Figure 1 summarizes legislators' responses to questions about the priority of the various roles and missions of public colleges and universities in their states. Some highlights of the results:

■ ***A large majority of legislators (86 percent) feel strongly that colleges and universities should focus more of their attention on undergraduate education as the core of the enterprise.*** Many echo the sentiment of this representative: "In times of decreased financial support, we should put the money where it serves the greatest number of people, and that is basic core education."

Figure 1

PRIORITIES FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES



Percentage saying "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree" to Q: "Colleges and universities should give more attention to..."

■ **Improving critical connections to elementary-secondary education also should be a top priority for colleges and universities.** Legislators resoundingly favor colleges and universities giving more attention to those concerns which straddle the boundaries between K-12 and postsecondary education, such as teacher education (88 percent), school reform (82 percent), and workforce preparation (79 percent).

■ **Most legislators are very concerned about the number of students requiring remedial coursework; however, many are uncertain about what to do.** Legislators are fairly evenly divided (34 percent disagree, 32 percent agree, and 32 percent are neutral) on whether colleges and universities should give remedial education more attention. While the consensus is that the problem is inherited from K-12 education, who to hold responsible is much less obvious.

Although not all policymakers agree with the approach, many believe that the trend is toward relegating all remedial courses to the community colleges. State policies vary on this point: many states already limit remediation programs to two-year colleges while others are taking steps in that direction.

■ **In contrast to the strong feelings legislators hold about undergraduate education and relationships with K-12 schools, legislators express more neutral feelings about research activities and graduate and professional education.** Many legislators, however, believe that higher education is focusing too much attention on research, at the expense of undergraduate students. Basic research, in particular, which often receives its major funding support from the federal government, is viewed as not addressing economic or social

needs of the state. Only 2 of the 21 legislators who have served 5 or fewer years believe colleges and universities should give more attention to basic research. Doctoral programs are also being scrutinized as some states undertake reviews of certain costly programs to identify inefficiencies, overlap, and duplication of effort.

A Strengthened Role for Community Colleges

Legislators are looking more closely at how community colleges fit into the whole spectrum of educational services. In addition to providing workforce training and remedial services, community colleges increasingly are seen as critical points of access to higher education, often at costs lower to both students and the state than four year colleges and universities. A significant majority of state leaders (71 percent) feels that to meet enrollment needs in their states, more students should be routed through community colleges for the first two years of higher education.

New Organizational Arrangements

There are consistent themes in the opinions of legislators about the reasons for new organizational arrangements. Many legislators hope to create new decentralized systems that will be less bureaucratic and less political. They also speak of changing the legislature's fiscal relationship with higher education. In general, institutions and their governing boards are being given more direct control over resources. Some legislatures are granting institutions the authority to increase tuition and prioritize spending.

Many of the themes for higher education reorganization are drawn from recent business and management literature. But at least part of

the impetus for change may be traced to elementary-secondary education reform agendas. When asked about a list of current K-12 education reform issues, over two-thirds of legislators (67 percent) reported that "school or statewide K-12 governance reform" is a legislative concern currently in their states. A key feature of decentralization is the shifting of authority downward to the local level. Decentralization is a philosophical underpinning of current K-12 reform initiatives, including proposals for "charter schools."

Accommodating Access

When asked whether their state is likely to experience higher education enrollment increases over the next decade, an overwhelming majority of legislators (84 percent) agree. Even when legislators note that high school graduation rates are not expected to increase in their states, many point to the ranks of non-traditional students enrolling in higher education as a result of changes in the state's economy. Nearly all education committee chairs are concerned that the increasing cost and contracting availability of higher education will limit access.

Insecurity over the economy, anticipated enrollment growth, escalating cost, and limited state revenues are among the many reasons why the outlook for accommodating access to higher education remains uncertain. There is also a widely shared perception that the costs of higher education — salaries, improvements, and maintenance — are increasing at a rate higher than other public enterprises.

Figure 2 summarizes legislative responses to 11 strategies a state or its colleges or universities might adopt as a means to address enrollment needs or increased enroll-

Figure 2

STRATEGIES TO MEET ENROLLMENT NEEDS

Strategies	% Agree*	% Action Likely**
Expand use of electronic technology	100%	95%
Provide more alternatives to college	78%	76%
Renovate and/or expand existing campus facilities	74%	63%
Route more students through community colleges for first two years	71%	31%
Require faculty to teach more	67%	26%
Shorten time needed for students to graduate	65%	46%
Rely more on private colleges	50%	28%
Institute differential tuition rates to encourage students to graduate in timely fashion	40%	29%
Limit or manage enrollment through higher tuition or higher admission standards	35%	25%
Shift resources from graduate education and research to undergraduate instruction	32%	9%
Build new campuses	19%	27%

*Percentage saying "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree" to Q: "To meet enrollment needs or increased enrollment demands...[strategy]?"

**Percentage saying "Yes" to Q: "Legislative action in the next three to five years..."

Source: NEA-HEIS, 1996

ment demand. It also includes legislators' opinions about whether the legislature in their state will take any direct action on that option in the next three to five years. There are a number of instances in which legislative support for a particular strategy is high while the chances of legislative action are deemed low. In most cases, this indicates that legislators favor the strategy, but don't consider it a legislative responsibility. As several legislators note, however, if colleges and universities fail to take steps on their own, the legislature is more likely to initiate action in the future.

A number of significant points based on the findings and comments of legislators are described below:

■ **The construction of new campuses, with the exception of**

community colleges or branch campuses, is far less likely to occur than the expansion or renovation of existing facilities.

Overall, 74 percent of legislators agree that existing campus facilities should be renovated or expanded, while only 19 percent support the construction of new campuses. Many legislators favor an investment in technology over bricks and mortar.

■ **The promise of technology to resolve a variety of access-related problems is the one single issue on which there is virtually no disagreement.** All the committee chairs wholeheartedly endorsed the expanded use of technology as a means for delivering educational instruction in higher education and 95 percent believe the legislature will continue its support through the next three to five years. There are a va-

riety of reasons legislators give for their faith in technology to solve problems: It is viewed as providing a critical pathway for linking colleges and universities with the public schools. The expansion of distance learning also is considered a "constituent-driven" issue, particularly in states with geographically dispersed populations. And, in the long term, technology is seen as a way to reduce the need to build new campuses.

■ **Faculty workload issues have generated considerable debate on both the issue's significance and what action to take, but relatively little new legislation.**

Two-thirds of legislators (67 percent) think faculty should teach more courses, yet only 26 percent believe their legislature will take any direct action in the next three to five years. Most prefer that the university system or campuses take the initiative to address workload reform.

Among those who disagree, there is some concern about the "bandwagon mentality" fueling workload debates. There are suggestions that faculty roles be clarified and made more visible so the public is better informed about what faculty do. Others consider an enhanced focus on teaching a matter of increasing efficiency and sharing responsibility.

■ **Legislators are concerned about the length of time it takes students to earn a degree, recognizing that moving efficiently through the higher education system is a responsibility to be shared by institutions and students.** Many legislators emphasize that colleges and universities have a responsibility to ensure that required courses are available and offered at convenient times and that course credits are transferable between institutions. Beyond that, "students have

a responsibility to work hard, take full loads, and not waste time.”

Paying for Higher Education

Almost without exception, education committee chairs see funding as the key issue for higher education. While a few states have substantial student financial aid programs, the main focus is on institutional funding. In most states higher education did better this year in state appropriations than since the beginning of the recession. In FY1995, states reported a two-year gain of 7.5 percent, yet there is wide variation, with nine states experiencing a decline in appropriations. However, the upturn in funding, as most higher education observers are quick to point out, does not necessarily signal a return to the prosperity of the 1980s.

Most education committee chairs concur with that assessment, although our survey findings indicate mixed opinions about the future. On the one hand, there are serious concerns about the adequacy of the current level funding for meeting higher education needs both now and in the future. On the other hand, many legislators are hopeful that their state’s economic picture will brighten over the next few years and that general state revenue sources will grow. While in the majority of cases this does not mean that higher education’s “slice of the revenue pie” is expected to increase, it does mean that legislators are hopeful that the whole pie will be larger.

Special Focus: Republicans and Democrats on Funding

The survey reveals that Republicans and Democrats hold sharply different opinions regarding higher education funding. Among Republicans nearly two-thirds (63 percent) think that the current lev-

el of funding for higher education is adequate to meet current needs while slightly more than one-fourth (26 percent) of Democrats agree (Figure 3). When asked whether the current level of funding will be adequate to meet future needs, Republicans are less optimistic (33 percent agree), but more hopeful than Democrats (18 percent agree). Democrats, for the most part, do not see the situation as improving, even if the economy picks up. On the question of higher education’s share of the total state budget over the next three to five years, it is largely Democratic legislators who think higher education’s share will decrease, while it is predominantly Republicans who think higher education’s share will increase.

Funding Strategies

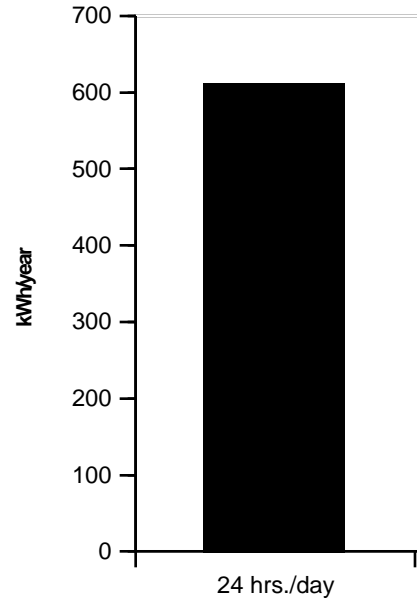
State legislatures have at least three basic options available that can be manipulated for higher education funding purposes. One, the legislature can *raise additional state revenues* through various taxes or other measures which then can be redirected toward higher education. Two, they can *adjust the balance* between public revenue sources (taxpayer) and private revenue sources (tuition and fees). And three, the legislature can *restructure the process* by which funds are distributed. Within each option there are a number of different strategies that can be employed, either individually or in combination. Our study asked education chairs about some of the funding strategies being discussed or tested in states currently and whether their state legislature was likely to act on any of them in the next few years. (Figure 4).

Survey findings provide some insights into the approaches legislatures are likely to adopt:

- **Legislators speculate that reliance on out-of-state tuition as**

Figure 3

HOW REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS DIFFER ON ADEQUACY OF FUNDING



Percentage saying “Yes” to Q: “Is the current level of funding for higher education in your state adequate to meet current needs?”

Source: NEA-HEIS, 1996

a revenue source will increase, but with limits on the number of non-resident students allowed, the rate of increase, and the uses for additional revenue.

- **Few legislators currently support shifting funds from institutional support to student financial aid programs, although many acknowledge that a high tuition/high aid strategy is being carefully examined.** The very real concern is that tuition increases will outpace increases in student financial aid.

- **Nearly half of the legislators (45 percent) stated that their legislatures are likely to “adopt a new funding formula in the next three to five years,” in most cases modifying the current formula to incorporate a greater focus on**

performance mechanisms. A number of states, including Alabama, Minnesota, Michigan, Arkansas, and Washington, began examining their current funding process during 1995 legislative sessions.

■ **A substantial number of legislators (44 percent) think their legislatures are likely in the next few years to “link funding to campus efforts to increase enrollment, graduation rates, or other measures of student or institutional performance.”** Many legislators view this approach as an appropriate avenue for addressing concerns about higher education’s accountability.

Conclusions

Not all of the findings presented here are new or even surprising. And in many cases, the findings raise as many questions as they answer. What they do point to is a significant amount of legislative concern, debate, and activity in searching for remedies to the problems which challenge higher education in the 1990s. There are also commensurate responses evident in colleges and universities around the country. Colleges and universities report significant

Figure 4

LIKELY FUNDING ACTIONS

Possible	% “Agree”*
Charge non-resident students higher tuition	73%
Charge resident students higher tuition	56%
Link to statewide priorities	52%
Adopt a new funding formula	45%
Link to institutional or student performance	44%
Link tuition increases to inflation measures	30%
Adopt a high tuition/high aid plan	23%
Increase other sources (lottery proceeds or bond issues)	21%
Shift from institution support to student financial aid	15%
Increase state taxes	9%

*Percentage saying “Somewhat Agree” and “Strongly Agree” to Q: “The legislature will take action over the next three to five years to...[option]?”

Source: NEA-HEIS, 1996

progress toward major realignment of their academic programs and services, often in response to external forces.

Yet efforts of state legislatures and colleges and universities proceed for the most part on parallel and uneven tracks without reaching common ground to address some of the most basic questions that should drive change: Should broad access to higher education be maintained? What are the long term economic and social implica-

tions of increased reliance on tuition as a means to pay for higher education? Can the promise of new technology meet the challenge of providing quality education to an increasing number of more diverse students?

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