

Making a Difference: Alumni Associations Rally on Behalf of Higher Education

It's budget season, and educated alumni from public universities around the U.S. are letting their state legislators know what they think. The theme is pervasive – regional and national economic progress and the United States' competitive global position are directly dependent on an educated workforce. In this 2011 legislative session, alumni whose lives and careers have benefitted from an education in their state's public institutions are sounding the alarm with greater force.

While alumni advocates have been a part of the scene in state capitals for more than a century, this year the stakes are much higher:

- The New York State legislature on March 30 cut an estimated \$289 million from the operating budget of the State University of New York (SUNY) system – reaching a total of \$1.4 billion in reductions to the state's public colleges and universities over the past four years.
- Some of Penn State's 24 campuses may be closed if Gov. Tom Corbett's proposed 50 percent cut in the system's appropriation stands. An action alert to the 30,000 alumni and other members of the Penn State Grassroots Network asked members to "Help Penn State Help Pennsylvania."
- In late March the president of the Texas Exes, the University of Texas Ex-Students Association, emailed 206,000 alumni supporters, urging them to protest the UT Board of Regents' assessment that much academic research lacks value and that some tenured faculty members could be replaced with lower-cost instructors.
- In California, hundreds of administrators, teachers, students, and alumni converged on the State Capitol for the annual "Advocacy Day." Gov. Jerry Brown already has signed bills reducing funding for the University of California and the California State University systems by \$500 million each, and the community college system by \$400 million. More reductions are threatened to close the state's budget gap – at a time when the universities are already educating significantly more students than a decade ago with substantially less funding.

Enrollment at public colleges and universities has nearly doubled since 1985, growing from 7.2 million to 11.6 million in 2010. Support by state and local governments to public and independent institutions of higher education had nearly tripled to \$88.9 billion in 2008, and then the recession changed everything. By FY2010, state and local educational appropriations fell to a 25-year low in inflation-adjusted terms, and the FY2012 trends are not promising. As demands grow for other services (such as health care) and

as tax revenues decline, the signs are clear that higher education budgets will not benefit from future state support at the levels they have enjoyed in the past.¹

Numerous studies over the past several years, including the Spellings Commission report in 2008, have documented two important trends – a growing skills gap as a more experienced Baby Boomer generation retires, and the accelerated demand for postsecondary education for the fastest-growing jobs in the knowledge economy. On a global scale, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Belgium, Ireland and Norway educate a greater percentage of their youth than the United States does, and the younger generation in the U.S. is less well-educated than those aged 45 to 54.² In December, the international Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development concluded in its report of three-year trends that the U.S. has fallen from top of the class to average and warned of U.S. economic fallout.³

California is a case in point. An innovator in higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, California now provides less than half the state support per student than it did 20 years ago; in fact, the state spends more on its penal system than its public universities. In the face of diminishing support, current trends show that by 2025 the California economy will require one million more college graduates than the state will be able to produce, according to California's Public Policy Institute.⁴

A Tradition of Advocacy

The role of institutional advocacy dates back to the founding of alumni associations as postsecondary education made great leaps forward at the end of the 19th century and public and land-grant universities gained increasing shares of their state budgets to fuel American progress. Alumni associations motivated grateful and passionate loyalists to advance the interests of their institutions and the quality of life around them. Some of these activities were narrowly focused – such as funding or land for a new football stadium – while a growing contingent of alumni activists joined in to advance broader institutional interests.

Typically the government relations professionals working in university central administration or public affairs offices have managed lobbying activities for their institutions. Reporting directly to the institutional leadership and representing their institutions' policy and budget interests, these staff can be expected to maintain a fairly tight rein on managing issues and messaging.

Traditionally the troops have been called in (faculty, staff, students, community, and alumni constituencies) for an annual show of force for “advocacy day” in state capitals or for specific timely issues. However, the impacts of reduced funding for higher education on society, the workforce and global competitiveness have become so widespread that institutions are increasingly harnessing the energy of their most loyal advocates – their tens of thousands of alumni. Recognizing the value of their

¹ “State Higher Education Finance FY2010,” by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO).

² “The Path to Prosperity: A Policy of Investment,” by Dan Hurley, Director of State Relations and Policy Analysis, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, May 2007.

³ The Global Ripple by the Center for Global Leadership, December 8, 2010.

⁴ “Viewpoints: Don't Take a Meat Ax to Higher Education,” by Hans Johnson, *Merced Sun-Star*, March 22, 2011.

degrees on their careers and personal lives, these graduates want not only to protect the value of their degrees but to ensure similar economic advantages for their children and their communities.

Advocacy as a Strategic Priority

Many universities today exhibit growing appreciation for the value of a strong partnership between the government relations and public affairs offices and alumni associations. At the University of Tennessee, the University of Minnesota, and Pennsylvania State University, for example, alumni advocacy is a priority of multi-year strategic plans that engage generations of alumni in their universities in segmented ways.

Functioning optimally, such partnerships acknowledge the access delivered by alumni relations to a phalanx of people to support the messages, materials and action plans that the institutional public affairs specialists produce. Like political and fundraising campaigns, these activities require alignment and internal collaboration, focus on issues that matter, and message consistency. Advocacy is a sophisticated process, operating with high-tech tools such as websites and mobile phones for updates, alerts, a pool of resources, and targeted outreach.

Through strategic and sophisticated relationship-building with opinion leaders – many of whom have degrees from the same institutions – alumni have become an essential component of the “grasstops” and “grassroots” advocacy networks that play both watchdog and educational roles in budget decisions and strengthen town-gown relationships for new projects, such as hospitals, residence halls, and athletic facilities.

The results are measurable. Alumni have become critical to an institution’s ability to raise its visibility in every county and corner of a state. They also use their connections in civic clubs, local schools, and the business community to reinforce the economic benefits of university research and tech transfer on local economies, not to mention the value proposition of a postsecondary education to career advancement and workforce quality.

Making a Difference

The Penn State Alumni Association launched the Penn State Grassroots Network in 2002, one of the largest efforts among U.S. universities. Penn State has more than 513,000 living alumni and currently 96,000 students, and its Grassroots Network counts nearly 40,000 today. Although this year presents another steep climb, the alumni network has a strong track record. In 2006, its activities helped increase the university’s appropriation from the state to its highest level in five years. And in 2008, it worked successful to help raise Pennsylvania’s appropriation even higher than the governor’s proposal – at a time when overall growth in state spending was the lowest since 2003.

In Minnesota, higher education institutions face a significant financial hit in bills approved in March 2011 by the state legislature – a 19 percent cut for the University of Minnesota and a 13 percent reduction for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. One way the University of Minnesota Alumni

Association is addressing this reality is by telling the story of “the U’s” impact on the economy and quality of life across the state. Taking an educational tack, the association has posted on its website the university’s latest economic development report with data that show, for example, that the U of M creates \$8.6 billion in total economic impact in Minnesota annually and its graduates account for 1 in every 43 jobs in the state.

Equally persuasive is the role that U of M alumni play in the state’s and nation’s economies. The university’s graduates have formed 10,000 companies in Minnesota and another 9,000 across the nation; they employ 500,000 people in Minnesota and another 600,000 nationally. These businesses generate \$100 billion in annual revenues in Minnesota and another \$130 billion nationally.⁵

In Tennessee, a key focus for the University of Tennessee Alumni Association’s new strategic plan is to realize strong advocacy for the UT system of higher education through an influential legislative relations program. Association leaders are mapping out a five-year implementation plan that concentrates on greater internal alignment within the university around legislative activities and communications, more targeted alumni engagement on key issues and, within the association, enhanced budget resources for legislative advocacy matched with defined outcomes and metrics – essentially a business plan for alumni advocacy.

Tough Trends but Strong Voices

Although relationships between public universities and their state governments are complex, alumni voices do count. Successful alumni personify the impact of postsecondary education on individuals, families, businesses and communities – and their informed awareness-building serves to sharpen the message. Alumni provide a continuous collective presence and keep the conversation going with focus and purpose.

In many cases, though, the advantages of generating alumni engagement have yet to be fully explored. For example, despite momentum toward the power of “one” in the 10-institution University of California system, advocacy efforts are largely decentralized on each campus, and the University of California-Berkeley appears to be the only institution with a strong advocacy presence attached to its alumni association.

Yet even in this tumultuous state budget cycle, there are occasional pleasant surprises. One of the most dramatic shifts has occurred in Virginia, where state support to the flagship University of Virginia has been steadily dropping in recent decades – from about 26 percent in 1990 to about 7 percent last year. In January, new Gov. Robert F. McDonnell delighted constituents by pledging to restore some recent recession-based cutbacks and provide institutions with predictable state support in the future. Gov. McDonnell’s goal was economic – he pledged to increase the number of Virginians with college degrees

⁵ Office of the Vice President for Research, University of Minnesota, 2011

by 100,000 during the next 15 years, and, in particular, the number who earn degrees in science and technology.

In announcing his plan in January, Gov. McDonnell pointed out that education returns more tax revenue to the state than it costs. Since 2000, enrollment in Virginia's colleges has grown by more than 31 percent, while the state's per-student contribution to higher education has shrunk by about half, according to a report that Gov. McDonnell commissioned last year.⁶

From state to state, issues and statistics vary, but one common thread connects alumni advocates. Whether the cause is universal health care, relief for Japan or the value of an education, the most successful advocates are well-informed, united around a shared purpose and coordinated in their efforts to achieve maximum impact. While a university's administration may set the policies, it is the alumni association that has access to the people. And as the growth in these networks demonstrates, many alumni want to serve their institutions by helping shape public opinion in civic clubs, schools, neighborhoods and businesses across the state.

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⁶ "Virginia Governor's Proposed Covenant With Colleges Defies Other States' Cuts," Chronicle of Higher Education, February 27, 2011.