

Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy

Volume 0 *NCSCBHEP Proceedings 2011*

Article 7

April 2011

Does Higher Education Serve a Public Good or Private Benefit?

Eric Kelderman

Chronicle of Higher Education

Follow this and additional works at: <http://thekeep.eiu.edu/jcba>

Recommended Citation

Kelderman, Eric (2011) "Does Higher Education Serve a Public Good or Private Benefit?," *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy*: Vol. 0 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://thekeep.eiu.edu/jcba/vol0/iss6/7>

This Proceedings Material is brought to you for free and open access by The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Eric Kelderman

Does Higher Education Serve a Public Good or Private Benefit?

The public appears skeptical about higher education's civic purpose, according to an annual poll by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com/article/Public-Opinion-of-Higher/64217/>). The December 2009 survey found that 60% of respondents believed colleges are "like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line," compared with 32% who said colleges are mostly interested in "making sure students have a good educational experience." In 2007, 52% of people polled considered colleges more concerned with being in the black, while 43% said education was the biggest concern for institutions.

Judging from my observation of state lawmakers (<http://chronicle.com/article/At-the-U-of-Arizona-Goals/17016/>), the poll question itself misses the mark. Legislators, in general, do not consider this issue on such a broad level. Instead, they are dealing with much more basic questions, such as: How much money will the state receive in tax dollars this year, and how much does it cost to pay for all of the demands on state coffers? In competition with higher education for state appropriations are areas carrying higher emotional impact, including health care for low-income and disabled citizens, elementary and secondary education (which is also often mandated by the state constitution) and the incarceration of criminals.

In addition, all but a handful of legislatures are considered "part-time" lawmaking bodies, meeting from 30 to 120 days each year. Five states have legislatures that meet only biannually, including Texas. Further, 15 states have term limits for legislators, increasing the amount of turnover in those chambers with each election and decreasing the time that legislators have to become fully informed of complex issues.

In short, it's hard to get and keep a legislator's attention on much of anything that isn't of immediate concern, or something that has the possibility of cutting costs or generating revenue without "raising taxes."

If lawmakers' attention deficits prevent a serious policy debate on the public good of higher education, academe undermines the argument by trying to accommodate lawmakers. The main defense of state appropriations for public higher education in recent years has become that colleges are the economic engines of their regions, including through improving the salaries of those who have a college degree. How many times have you or your administrators pointed out that those with a college degree earn, on average, a million dollars more than those who don't have that credential? (<http://chronicle.com/article/SUNY-Sets-a-New-Course-With/65045/>, <http://chronicle.com/article/With-States-in-Trouble/49341/>)

That argument has resonated with the nation's governors. The National Governors Association released a study in March arguing that Colleges need to do a better job of aligning their programs with the economic needs of their states. [The report](http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/colleges-should-serve-the-job-market-governors-say/31530) (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/colleges-should-serve-the-job-market-governors-say/31530>) highlights steps taken in four states and recommends ways lawmakers can persuade colleges to move beyond their traditional emphasis on a broad liberal-arts education to thinking more about skills for specific jobs. It suggests that colleges use "rigorous labor-market data" to set goals and get more input from local businesses on the skills students need.