



Illinois Board of Higher Education
Faculty Advisory Council

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Higher Education and the Public Good

A paper advanced by the Faculty Advisory Council to the Illinois Board of Higher Education

“I think by far the most important bill in our whole code, is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people.” Thomas Jefferson

For several years the Faculty Advisory Council has been stressing that workforce preparation is not the only public good that Illinois’s universities and colleges provide. We are not just “economic engines.” As the Illinois Commitment expresses it, “The Illinois Commitment is premised on the conviction that higher education provides the foundation for Illinois’ future by enhancing the social, economic, and civic well-being of the state and its residents.”

The Faculty Advisory Council would like to make the following observations regarding the contributions of our colleges and universities to the quality of life for all Illinoisans.

An educated electorate. Democracy is dependent on an educated electorate, but never before have the public policy issues facing the state and the nation been more technical, more complex, and thus more in need of that educated electorate. In a time when even basic literacy is at risk in our public schools, the problems we face require the most advanced sort of literacy in order to allow for intelligent decision-making. For instance, in the next decade we will make decisions about the environment (especially global warming) that may well determine the habitability of large sections of the Earth. Equally grave public policy issues confront us in relation to globalization, immigration, and social issues like health care and social security. An educated electorate will not only actually take the trouble to vote, it will know why voting is important, and it will vote knowledgably.

An enriching culture. Critics on both the right and left of the political spectrum lament the baseness of our popular culture. Television, Hollywood movies, video games, popular music, and the internet are ever more violent and basely sexualized. And yet for most young people these are nearly the only access to art that they have. Outside of major urban areas like Chicago, it is only in communities enriched by universities and colleges that people are offered the opportunity to experience something that questions and transcends popular culture. For most of our young people, it is only in our institutions of higher education that they will have their first experiences of art, classical music, theater, and literature.

The synergy of the economy and the culture. It is false to think that higher education's contribution to the economy is restricted to workforce preparation and economic innovation. The economic health of cities and states is also closely related to their cultural vitality, and Illinois' universities and colleges play a leading role in providing that vitality. As recent census data has revealed, the cities that are growing are associated not with "rust belt" heavy industry but with "new economy" metro areas like Austin, San Francisco, Seattle, and even places that would formerly have been considered geographically remote like Boise and Raleigh. As Richard Florida argues in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the successful cities of the future will depend on the New Economy of technology and information. But the New Economy will depend on the cultural richness of the region (natural resources, food, culture, and, most importantly, universities) to retain its educated and sophisticated workforce.

As Florida observes, "Most who have commented on the university's role in the economy believe the key lies in increasing its ability to transfer research to industry, generate new inventions and patents, and spin-off its technology in the form of startup companies. As such, there has been a movement in the U.S. and around the world to make universities "engines of innovation," and to enhance their ability to commercialize their research. Universities have largely bought into this view, both because it makes their work more economically relevant and as a way to bolster their budgets. Unfortunately, not only does this view oversell the immediately commercial function of the university; it also misses the deeper and more fundamental contributions made by the university to innovation, the larger economy, and society as a whole."

Recommendations

1. The Board should consistently use the language of “quality of life and the public good” in its descriptions of the importance of higher education to the state.
2. The Board should develop evaluation standards that speak directly to the three issues described above.
3. The Board should seek partners for a public relations campaign to better inform the public about how Illinois’s colleges and universities contribute to the quality of life for everyone in this state.
4. As a first step, the Board should invite Richard Florida, or someone like him, to make a presentation to the Board and critical members of the Illinois House and Senate. (Florida is currently the Hirst Professor in the School of Public Policy at George Mason University and a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.)