Champions for Higher Education: Advocates Play Larger Role Than Ever in Boosting Support for Public Colleges and Universities

By Karen Doss Bowman
As the United States has become highly politicized and divided over the past decade or more, public perception of higher education has soured. The price tag for college tuition has risen steeply as state investment in higher education has been dramatically reduced. At the same time, a host of political, social and demographic challenges have made it increasingly complicated to advance the higher education agenda.

Never before has the work of higher education advocates been so critical—and so complex. “Advocacy for higher education is essential right now because competition for scarce state resources is so intense,” says Tom Harnisch, AASCU’s director of state relations and policy analysis. “Higher education advocacy takes a tremendous amount of political acumen when you have to juggle so many issues. For example, a legislator may not be on your side for one issue, but they might be more receptive to you on another. Therefore, it’s essential to build and maintain those relationships, even when you disagree.”

**Budgets, College Affordability and Talent Development**

One of the key areas of advocacy is funding and state investment. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, funding for higher education in most states still hasn’t rebounded to pre-recession rates. At the same time, state budget revenue growth has slowed: The August 2017 AASCU State Outlook report cited a survey from the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO) indicating that state budget projections for fiscal year (FY) 2017 did not meet projections for 33 states. That growth is expected to stay flat for FY 2018, creating challenges for legislators making budgeting decisions.

Louisiana is a state where higher education has been particularly hard hit. According to Erin Cowser, executive director of public and governmental affairs at Southeastern Louisiana University (SELU), her institution once received about 75 percent of its funding from the state. That level of support has reduced to about 18 percent. Fortunately, the state legislature last year held funding steady for the first time in nearly a decade.

“We’re just trying to keep everything together with some duct tape and bubble gum, while at the same time improving all of our productivity numbers in terms of graduation rates and so forth,” Cowser says. “Even while having our funding cut, there are new standards that have been put in place and a funding formula. So we’re very proud of being able to keep the momentum going here at Southeastern. It’s kind of like tap dancing on a tightrope. We desperately need stable funding and would love additional funding, but we’re being realistic. We know that the state’s revenues just aren’t there.”

Cowser and other SELU officials also are encouraging legislators to preserve funding for TOPS—a state scholarship program that helps cover tuition costs for thousands of students who attend the state’s public institutions. The program helps to make higher education more affordable for families.

When reaching out to legislators, the message from SELU officials is: “Please don’t take anymore,” Cowser says. “We’ve trimmed, we’ve reduced programs—and we’ve done all this while at the same time improving our graduation rates by double digits. We’ve done the belt tightening, we’ve trimmed the budget so that all the low hanging fruit is gone. But we’re at that tipping point where it’s going to start cutting the quick.”

For Andrew Morse and his colleagues at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) Office of Governmental Relations, a key strategy in relating to lawmakers is to find ways to “get our goals hitched to their wagons.” For example, they’ve developed informative, easy-to-digest materials—with graphs, charts and tables—to illustrate how UNI has operated at or below the consumer price index since FY 2008. These points are crucial at a time when lawmakers are working through a tight fiscal environment for the state.
The university also has made great strides in reducing student debt through financial literacy efforts, such as one-on-one private loan counseling. With an average student debt that sits at two-thirds of the national average, UNI has seen its average debt per borrower decline by $3,300 since 2010. This can be attributed to UNI’s signature financial literacy and debt reduction program, Live Like a Student. One of the most effective components of the initiative is the mandatory private education loan counseling for those who apply for this aid. This feature of the program has led two-thirds of those who apply for private education loans to reduce their debt by an average of $951 per year—an institutional impact of about $150,000 in reduced borrowing each year at UNI.

“That confounds legislators in a positive way because they often don’t realize higher education operates that way,” says Morse, assistant to the president for board and governmental relations. “When we show financial stewardship by the work we’re doing to decrease student debt through financial literacy, for example, that resonates with them. And all of a sudden, they want to hear about our goals and priorities because they know we’re being good stewards of taxpayer and student dollars. That strategy has enabled us to have a lot of rich conversations about our goals for investing state appropriations and tuition to fulfill our mission as an institution that’s dedicated to [serving] Iowa.”

Another issue higher education advocates address with lawmakers, as well as the general public, is the critical role public universities play in workforce development and economic growth of the regions they serve. The most recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher educational attainment earn more than those with less education. And data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis in 2016 shows that states ranking the highest in per capita income have the greatest number of college graduates.

“Advocacy is important within the landscape of understanding higher education and the role we have in changing people’s lives and providing greater opportunities for individuals to pursue various careers and other avenues,” adds Constance Brooks, vice chancellor for government and community affairs for the Nevada System of Higher Education. “We also have a role in workforce development and in addressing industry needs around the country. If you look at innovations such as cybersecurity, higher education is essential to all those efforts.”

“The data is overwhelming, and it always has been, in terms of the return on investment to graduates, to their communities, to their states and to society as a whole,” says Dan Hurley, CEO of the Michigan Association of State Universities. “[So, communicating] the need for talent at the regional state level in order for states to be competitive—and in concert with the need for states to keep college affordable—is critical.”

Guns on Campus, Free Speech and Other Political Issues

The work of promoting the interests of public higher education goes beyond seeking stronger state financial investment. Advocates follow and act upon a wide range of issues debated in state legislatures and on Capitol Hill, including free speech on campus, collective bargaining, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and due process for students accused of sexual assault.

When Tennessee state lawmakers proposed a bill allowing full-time public college employees with handgun-carry permits to possess their weapons on campus during the 2016 legislative session, officials at the University of Tennessee (UT)—as well as other higher education leaders in the state—were initially opposed to the law. Knowing the votes were not on their side, UT President Joe DiPietro and his government relations team went to work, advocating for amendments that would help to mitigate potential pitfalls of the proposed legislation. These included concessions such as requiring the employees who carry handguns on campus to notify the university police force and prohibiting firearms at certain activities such as football games or disciplinary meetings. In addition to coordinating efforts with the statewide law enforcement community, they rallied the UT Advocacy Network of alumni, parents and students to express their viewpoints to legislators.

“The University of Tennessee has a long history of opposing any effort to increase the presence of firearms on campus,” says Carey Whitworth, assistant vice president in the UT Office of Government Relations and Advocacy. “We knew this law was going to pass, so our office worked to get some concessions in that bill. It was an issue where we didn’t particularly care for the legislation, but we also were faced with the idea of what can we do to make this a bit more palatable? We requested those changes and were successful in getting them.”
Communicating Your Message Effectively

When it comes to advocating for higher education, one of the most important steps is to establish and maintain positive relationships with elected officials at all levels, as well as their legislative staff. Chancellors, presidents and government relations employees must be able to clearly articulate the value of higher education for every community—not just in terms of jobs and economic development, but also for benefits such as research and technology innovations, high quality health care options, and cultural amenities.

Shane Broadway, former speaker of the Arkansas House of Representatives who now works as vice president for university relations at the Arkansas State University System, says higher education advocates should craft clear, succinct messages. Lawmakers are inundated with thousands of emails and social media messages every day. It’s important to find out representatives’ preferred modes of communication and to be selective about when and how to reach out to them. Also, understand their interests and provide related information in easily understandable, quick-to-read formats, such as infographics that are light on text and heavy on illustrations and photos.

“Lawmakers are getting so much information and have very little time to consume it all,” Broadway says. “So, trying to find the right avenues to get your message to them is key.”

Vincent Pedone, executive director of the Council of Presidents of the Massachusetts State University System and also a former state representative in Massachusetts, recommends that public institutions in a particular state join forces to coordinate their advocacy efforts for budget items. In his role, Pedone represents nine state university campuses. But when it comes to issues such as collective bargaining, he coordinates advocacy efforts with his counterparts in the University of Massachusetts System and the Massachusetts Community Colleges to augment their message.

“You can present a unified voice in lobbying the legislature when it comes to funding,” says Pedone. “One of the things that was frustrating to me as a legislator was to have 25 institutions come in with so many different asks. There were so many voices that no one was ever heard. If we find commonality in our messaging, it allows us to speak with a strong, single voice.”

Building an Army of Supporters

There’s strength in numbers. Chancellors, presidents and government relations staffers are advised to form coalitions and rally champions who can reinforce their messages and promote their institutions’ interests.

Morse recommends engaging student government leaders “to empower them to build capacity for principled advocacy in their state capitols.” UNI Student Government leaders held weekly meetings with House and Senate leaders at the Iowa State Capitol during legislative sessions to discuss the importance of supporting the university’s ability to continue delivering an affordable, high-quality education.

“Our government relations team engaged them as partners by teaching them advocacy skills, serving as a sounding board for their ideas, and encouraging their interactions with lawmakers,” Morse says. “Our students also demonstrated sincere gratitude to legislators—through in-person thank-yous and personalized email follow-ups from meetings. We consistently hear about how positive their presence is in Des Moines.”

Alumni and donors also can be effective advocates for the institutions they love. The University of Tennessee, for example, has developed an advocacy network comprising over 6,000 people. During the legislative sessions, Whitworth sends out weekly email briefings to this group to keep them apprised of the issues being debated in the state capitol that have implications for UT. Governing board members and community leaders also can be effective advocates for public institutions.

When the University of Nevada, Las Vegas made plans to establish a medical school several years ago, Brooks and other officials mobilized leaders from the local business and medical community to speak out about the benefits the school could provide within the region. The local Chamber of Commerce also endorsed the effort. Their work paid off: The first class of 60 cohorts enrolled last fall.

“These community leaders were vocal and front and center in advocating for funding from the state for the medical school—so it was more than just higher education officials talking about what this medical school would do for economic development,” Brooks says. “This is a great example of how we reached out of the higher education bubble and were able to use the advocacy efforts of other stakeholders around the state.”

Whitworth recommends recruiting advocates carefully. Be strategic and invest time in the process to find the right people to deliver the message. The alumni association can be a valuable resource in this endeavor.

“It’s more important to have the right messengers than to have the numbers,” Whitworth says. “Sometimes it is more effective to have the right people explain the ramifications [of certain legislation] than to have 100 messengers who are the wrong messengers. An institution’s alumni association has all the information on these advocates. They know what they’re interested in, what pulls at their heartstrings. You’ve got to have a great relationship with those folks and a willingness to share information and work together for the good of your institution.”

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