

Keeping higher education on public agenda

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New Jersey's colleges and universities, and citizens have something to celebrate: passage of the "Building for the Future" higher education \$750 million bond on Nov. 6 by nearly a 2/1 favorable vote. This is the first general obligation bond to support new academic facilities since 1988.

Legislative leaders such as Senate President Sweeney, Assembly Speaker Oliver, and minority/majority leaders Kean and Greenwald, and Gov. Christie should be congratulated for passing legislation to put the bond on the ballot. University, labor and business leaders should feel good about building a coalition to support passage of the bond, which got national attention.

But this victory, more about college opportunity for our citizens than buildings, should help to move post-secondary education higher on the public agenda. The vote in favor of the bond, especially in this difficult economy, was a big vote of confidence in the importance of our colleges.

College leaders and boards of trustees should use the bond win as a means to engage citizens about the value of college in New Jersey, and to ask citizens who strongly support college opportunity to help colleges meet policy reform challenges to keep higher education strong, now and in the future. A big mistake would be to use the victory to make a stronger case in Trenton, based only on more state investment. The state's public colleges are primarily funded by tuition and fees, not by the state. They are deserving of greater investment to achieve the state's educational and economic growth goals. But more state funding will come only if higher education is viewed as a high priority by citizens and policy makers.

Accordingly, the big issue for our colleges is a continuing effort to strengthen public trust, and using that trust to tackle needed educational and business reforms to keep colleges high on the public agenda, where they compete for attention with other important issues such as K-12 education, health, taxes, transportation, the environment and more.

No single college or university can accomplish this goal alone. They all have to work together, as they did on the bond. College leaders and governing boards will have to do more than leading and managing particular colleges to make a transparent case not only about the promise that college holds for New Jersey's future prosperity, but also to engage the public in a candid conversation about the challenges of college affordability, productivity and educational accountability.

The case should stress how higher education aligns with the larger public agenda regarding social equity, jobs, economic prosperity, global competitiveness and individual liberty in the Garden State.

Some reforms needed include increasing academic productivity through program and degree credit changes, class and calendar rescheduling, assessment of prior learning, stronger partnerships with business, labor, schools and other colleges, and reexamination of pricing policy, including management of student financial aid — all for the purpose of reducing pressure to raise tuition, and strengthening student retention and degree completion. State law and policy regulating budget, personnel, purchasing and contracting need reform, too.

These reforms will lead to greater college access, affordability and accountability for the academic product. Involving citizens to share responsibility for change will generate stronger public trust, more political support and action to investment in higher education as a state priority.

Colleges are already doing many of these things. But they will have to do more at a faster pace to stay high on a very competitive public policy agenda. Fortunately, they have much of the operational autonomy needed to succeed. Still, this won't be easy.

It will take much more than a public relations campaign. Winning greater public trust will mean a continuing effort to engage citizens, opinion leaders, faculty, presidents and trustees in an open conversation about our future and how

higher education helps to achieve it. The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, through the Hughes Center for Public Policy, Stockton Polling Institute, and work on Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance, will assist in this effort.

The recent winning vote on the higher education bond signals that higher education in New Jersey is headed in the right direction. The wind in our colleges' sails is not just new investment, but the acknowledgment of significant public trust, and the opportunity to provide the leadership to build a stronger partnership with citizens, to fulfill the promise of college opportunity in the Garden State.

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