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The year Illinois skipped higher education

By Jim Nowlan

This may be the year, unprecedented, that Illinois simply skips funding for its colleges and universities as well as for students on state scholarships. As a broken-down professor, I hope I am wrong, as the consequences will be severe.

Yet there is little outcry. Higher education is, I fear, out of favor.

We must create a broad-based blue ribbon commission to look ahead and advise our colleges and universities as to what is in store for them in terms of state support.

Don't snicker. In the 1950s, a blue ribbon task force called the Illinois Commission on Higher Education provided a blueprint for the state that ultimately gave us a tiered system of public higher education that has been admired across the country.

In this present budget year (July 1, 2015-June 30, 2016), most of the state's functions are being funded by court orders, even though the legislature and governor have never agreed upon a budget.

Higher education is the one major function of state government that has not been covered by the courts. Thus, there is no money from the state for operating the colleges and universities, nor for paying the tuition scholarships for 130,000 students (out of about 900,000 total students in all Illinois colleges and universities).

[The colleges limp along on tuition income, research grants, reserves, borrowing and program cuts. I saw, for example, that Carl Sandburg College in Galesburg, nearby to my home,

recently closed its adult education program, once a mainstay of community college responsibilities.]

Relative to the rest of state government, funding for higher education has been slipping for decades. Three decades ago, higher education received one dollar for every two dollars going to our public schools; today it is one dollar for every four.

Three decades ago, higher education represented 8.5 percent of total state funding; today it is 3.3 percent (these figures exclude pension funding, then and now).

Even in the context of the relative decline, higher education has fared pretty well until this past decade, and some of the institutions got fat and sassy.

For example, the public has been shocked, understandably, by proposed out-the-door settlements of half a million dollars or more for the ousted president at the College of DuPage, a large community college in the suburbs, and for the deposed head of the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois.

In addition, faculty salaries reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars for “star” professors, who can win big research grants, seem out of line to the common Joe, as do salaries for presidents that are becoming almost as high as those for their football coaches!

The U. of I. at Urbana-Champaign is home to one of the largest and absolutely best engineering and computer science colleges in the world. Campus leaders feel compelled to compete with the wealthiest universities for top faculty, who keep the research labs humming and maintain the campus’s top world rankings.

Maybe this is all wrong. Maybe the state should tell our public university research faculties to get out of the labs and back to teaching five or more courses a semester, as instructors do at our community colleges.

I think this would be disastrous for our major universities, but if that is what the lawmakers and public want, then tell the university leaders so they can figure out how to adjust, and so the research faculty can look elsewhere.

I have always thought of higher education as a “public good” rather than just a “private good.” To me, higher education is a key component of the economic well-being and quality of life of a state, rather than solely a benefit to the students.

Maybe the private universities can alone fulfill these roles for our state.

Again, if so, we need to think this through and project our financial commitment to higher education, or lack of it, out five to ten years.

Unfortunately, instead of looking ahead, something our state never seems to do, Illinois is budgeting backwards, a concept I have never before encountered. That is, we are asking our colleges and universities to spend money for programs we have approved. Then, sometime later, the state will tell the higher ed units what if anything of that spending the state will reimburse.

Crazy. Embarrassing.

I don't think our governor and lawmakers are in a frame of mind right now to gaze out the window and look ahead.

That is why a top-tier blue ribbon commission comprising present and future leaders of the state from varied walks of life needs to lay out a plan that takes into account both the resources likely to be available in the coming years and the objectives we feel our higher education sector must accomplish for us.

