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College presidents worry about higher ed's future

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Regional

College presidents worry about higher ed's future

One of the major responsibilities of college and university leaders is to look into the future and act accordingly. They are supposed to see things coming, whether good or bad. That is why they are assumed to be good thermometers about the prospects for higher education. Now a new survey gives us a glimpse about how they see the present and the future.

Published just a few weeks ago, the study, titled "2017 Survey of College and

University Presidents," shows the level of concern by U.S. higher education presidents

about the future of their institutions. According to the survey, only six in 10 presidents

strongly agree or agree that they are confident that their institution will be financially

sustainable over the next five years. Yet, when asked about the next 10 years that

confidence goes down to 52 percent.

Their main concern is enrollment. Although in the past that was only a major

concern for private institutions, public institutions – because they receive less and less

financial support from states – have become more and more dependent on revenue from tuition and fees.

According to this study, this concern is particularly true when it comes to supporting low-income students, enrolling students who are more likely to be retained and graduate on time, and enrolling their college's target number of undergraduates.

The survey was conducted by Gallup (a company well-known for conducting

public opinion polls) on behalf of Inside Higher Ed (a digital media company better

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known for its electronic publication under the same name), from January 5 through February 1 of this year. This is important regarding enrollment because it means that the 706 college leaders who responded to the questionnaire did so before the projections of international student enrollment was publicized in the media.

Those projections are that for the next academic year those enrollments will decrease by 40 percent due to the anxiety created by the current U.S. government toward foreigners in general. This was predictable. International enrollment decreased by 25 percent after the 9/11 attacks, despite the fact that the U.S. government at the time did not take the aggressive attitude against foreign nationals as the one taken by the current administration. Since many colleges and universities have resorted to increasing international enrollments to make up for falling domestic students, this is really bad news.

The respondents of the surveys represented 385 public institutions, 292 private institutions and 29 institutions from the for-profit sector, showing that this particular concern goes across the board, although the concern about enrolling low-income students was particularly acute among leaders of private baccalaureate colleges.

Despite racial incidents on campuses in the past few years and an increase of hate crimes taking place since the last presidential election, the majority of campus leaders describe the state of race relations at their colleges as either "excellent" (20 percent) or "good" (63 per-

cent) while more than three-fifths of presidents describe race relations at American colleges in general as "fair." These results may reflect that many college presidents leading either fairly racially homogeneous campuses try to avoid the subject. In this very survey, one in five college presidents said that following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, racial incidents have increased on their campuses.

Another very interesting result of the survey is that only 12 percent of presidents strongly agree or agree that most Americans understand the purpose of higher education, while half disagree or strongly disagree. And I say it is interesting because campus leaders tend to emphasize sports, buildings, and other amenities in their marketing efforts instead of concentrating on academics. This should be a wake up call that they need to change their tune when it comes to their publicity strategy.

This conclusion is confirmed by another finding of the survey that shows that college leaders believe that "the public thinks that college is less affordable than it is because of attention to student debt levels, that colleges are wealthier than is the case because of attention to large endowments, and that colleges have misplaced priorities because of the campus amenities many colleges now offer students," according to the report.

These results show that leaders of public institutions should demonstrate more courage and less cowardice when pointing fingers at the real culprits of lack of financial support for their colleges: legislators and/or governors. Regarding endowments, college presidents need to do a better job explaining how endowments work, that they are not a "piggy bank" from where you can take money at will but instead represent funds tied

up for specific purposes as specified by the donors. And regarding amenities, that goes without saying.

Most presidents (76 percent) are in favor of recently adopted federal policies to include gender identity among areas protected by anti-bias laws, while 63 percent believe that there should be a preponderance of evidence in evaluating sexual assault allegations. Given the continuous scandals on campuses regarding sexual assault this may be a mild form of self-defense.

Other curious findings of this report include that most leaders of private colleges oppose their teaching assistants to unionize, and that about two-thirds of all of them "strongly agree or agree that campus protests after Trump's election have played into an image that higher education is intolerant of conservative views." No wonder that 7 in 10 Americans perceive that anti-intellectual sentiment is growing in the U.S. and that the majority see that the American public sees a disconnect between the academy and much of American society.

The report also says that "about one in three college presidents say they spoke out more on political issues during the 2016 presidential campaign than they usually do and that 16 percent say they wish they had spoken out more than they did."

Hopefully this report will convince college and university leaders that many of the problems in higher education have been created by them and that they are the ones who need to do something about it.

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