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State Higher-Education Officials Are Frustrated by Public Apathy

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Colorado Springs

As state higher-education officials from around the nation met here in July, many expressed the view that state lawmakers and the public at large fail to place enough importance on the need to improve colleges. Several speakers here at the annual conference of the State Higher Education Executive Officers called on the group's members to work with elected officials and college educators to define shared higher-education goals and convince the public of their importance.

Higher education is "not seen as a pressing public priority," said Jane V. Wellman, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a nonprofit research organization, who is advising the Higher Education Solutions Project, a public-communications campaign to be conducted by the American Council on Education. She said the project, in putting together its campaign, has held focus groups across the country to determine how Americans view higher education. Its findings suggest that most Americans view it as a subject that touches them only when they have a child in college.

"It's seen as someone else's problem," she said.

Lawmakers also do not see higher education as a pressing issue, said Larry Isaak, president of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact and a former chancellor of the North Dakota University System. When the National Conference of State Legislatures released its top-10-issues forecast in December, higher education did not even make the list, he noted.

Higher Education to Blame?

David A. Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, argued that higher education may be partly to blame for its own woes. Often, he said, colleges and their employees sabotage their relationships with the public. He cited several developments that had caused people to "question if we understand we work for the public good." Those included the rapid growth of the salaries of public-college presidents, and the controversy over remarks made by Ward Churchill, the University of Colorado professor who criticized victims of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Jack R. Warner, commissioner of higher education in Rhode Island, said he worried that higher-education officials are not always on the same page as college leaders. He argued that many colleges are driven by a "*U.S. News & World Report* accountability system," which, he said, values institutional advantage rather than public benefits. "That is in opposition to what we are talking about," he said.

Ms. Wellman said that public-opinion research conducted by the Higher Education Solutions Project found that the best way to sell higher education is to talk about it as an investment in the future. The group plans to make that case through television advertisements and a grassroots campaign. Still, she cautioned, simply embarking on a public-relations project will not work unless colleges make serious changes.

Thomas D. Layzell, president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and of the higher-education-officers group, said accountability is "too often viewed as a one-way street with a lot of finger-pointing at one end and a lot of defensiveness ... at the other."

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