

Dr. Glen Askins Remarks - December 5, 1991

I feel that the series of articles in this past Sunday's State newspaper on "Higher Education, Another Example of Power Failure" deserves some comment from a member of the Commission. I would like to congratulate particularly Mr. Bill Robinson, Mrs. Claudia Brunson and Mr. Brad Warthen for their articles. I think they were extremely accurate, extremely fair, and indicated a great deal of time spent on research and probably a better than average understanding of the complexities of the problems that challenge higher education in South Carolina. I would also commend Commissioner Sheheen for his article and also Dr. DiGiorgio for the encouraging slant that he placed on higher education in this state. However, after reading these articles I was left with the impression that the need and use of "power" in higher education is generally misunderstood.

When I first came on the Commission approximately five and one-half years ago, I was quite confused and generally misunderstood the position of the real strength of an institution. Dr. David Maxwell has pointed out on several occasions the difference between a university and an industry. In industries ideas begin at the top or at the administrative level and are passed on to the workers. In a college or university, the pathway is just the opposite. The ideas begin with the faculty and are passed to the administration. Thus, the real strength and power of our educational institutions should, and in most cases, do lie with the faculty. In fact, many of us have heard that to be a good college president there must be adequate "spies" to determine which direction the faculty is going so that the president may get in front and lead them.

The ideas that I present to you come from Frank Newman's book, On Choosing Quality. Commission members who have served a longer period of time have heard me use these same ideas previously, but I think for benefit of newer members of the Commission (and also possibly for the press and the visitors) that they should be reiterated.

The relationship between a university or college and the legislature is very complex. The state has an essential role to play in the functioning of the state university or college. Appropriate public policy is needed, not only to insure accountability but also to create a climate that nurtures aspiration. A constantly evolving state policy is needed as a force for change, but the state must also avoid inappropriate intrusion into the institution, intrusion that stifles and impedes the quality and hampers the responsiveness of the university.

Inappropriate intrusion is characterized by attempts of those in state government to interfere with the operation of the university, either to serve ends that are questionable in themselves or to serve ends that may or may not be appropriate through means that are questionable. This intrusion may be bureaucratic with unnecessary account of productive regulations; it may be political with the exercise of raw political power for self interest, rather than public interest or ideological. Unfortunately, some universities and colleges will at one time or another invite inappropriate intrusion. Four examples of these are listed by Frank Newman: "End runs" of the governing process to achieve campus goals. (A most recent example of this was the super computer issue where two of our institutions went directly to the legislature.) Another, which we probably see more frequently, is when institutional ambitions run counter to the agreed institutional mission. Failure to address appropriate state needs in a timely manner and self limitation where the university itself, rather than the state, tends to limit the freedom of discussion on the campus are other examples of political intrusion.

But although a significant degree of independence is essential, a constructive relationship recognizes the need for checks and balances. Left totally to its own devices, a university or college will frequently evolve toward self interest, rather than public interest. The state must therefore act as a constructive force, but the university or college needs a considerable degree of autonomy and flexibility so that it has the freedom to teach and research without politicized interference, so that creativity and imagination are encouraged, and so that resources are used efficiently. We need, therefore, a strong but appropriate state role.

I think it is extremely important for everyone to realize that this Commission does not seek to become a Board of Regents. In all my time on this Commission and in conversations with current members, as well as with a number of previous members, I have never heard one person indicate that they thought this would be appropriate for the state of South Carolina; nor have I heard any member of the Commission's staff ever express a desire or even suggest that this Commission should become a Board of Regents. In fact, from what I understand, states that do have a board of regents are having their own unique problems. North Carolina did extremely well with their board of regents as long as they had Bill Friday, but this could very well have been on the strength of his personality.

There is a "no man's land" that lies between the legislature and the public institutions of higher learning, and the Commission on Higher Education occupies this territory.

I personally feel that we have all the power that we need, though I admit that in some areas I would like to see our role enhanced. For example, it is unclear exactly where the Commission's responsibility lies in the determination or approval of mission of the institutions, and I do feel that we should have some influence in this area. But this Commission does not need any more power. If we carry out our role and fulfill our responsibilities in a fair and objective manner, considering at all times the needs of the state and not the needs of the institutions, we have all the influence and power that we need.

Occasionally the legislature will overrule the Commission, but I do not think this happens as frequently now as it has in the past. In some instances when we have been overruled I believe their position was correct. But let us remember this, and again I quote from Frank Newman: "There are no great universities run by governors or budget analysts or legislators".

I personally am satisfied with the organization and distribution of power in higher education in this state. I feel that its structure compares favorably with any of the other forty-nine states and wish to reassure the institutions that I do not see us involved in any power struggle with the institutions or with the legislature. I reiterate that if we live up to our responsibilities as mandated by the laws of the State of South Carolina in a fair and objective manner, higher education cannot help but benefit.