

Comments of Dr. D. Glenburn Askins, Jr., June 2, 1994

I would like to say that I have never received an honor that approaches that of the confidence instilled in me by electing me Chairman of this Commission. I must admit, however, that the last eighteen months have been somewhat less than satisfying. The only real topic that I had on my agenda when elected Chairman was to improve the relationship between the institutions and the Commission. In spite of a sincere effort on my part, I watched this relationship continue to deteriorate. This was frustrating in several respects.

Shortly after being elected Chairman, I heard for the first time that the institutions were considering forming an organization, or group, that would work for them and would oppose the Commission. Realizing that conditions were at a low ebb, (not the lowest as I later found out), I visited the Presidents of many of the institutions. With the help of Joe Turner and Marvin Jones, we talked to a number of people, trying to determine exactly what their complaints and criticisms were.

Three complaints seemed to surface more than any others: too much reporting, the Commissioner speaking for the Commission on subjects that the Commission had not met on, and seeing the Commissioner's picture and quotes in the newspaper too often. Another complaint which was quite difficult to identify

inferred that the Commission was not an advocate of Higher Education. This may have been, in fact, a summary of the other three complaints. We then talked to the Executive Director of the SREB and to several Chief Executive Officers in other states. We found that almost uniformly the Commissioner or Executive Director and the Commission of each state were under constant criticism from the institutions in almost every instance (a sign of the times)! There is a natural healthy tension between institutions and the Commission. The colleges and universities have an advocacy role for their institutions while our perception is statewide. Our advocacy role is not only for the statewide system of Higher Education but for the people. I then talked to several leading members in the General Assembly, as well as representatives from my own district, and frankly found nothing but compliments in this area. These were compliments not only for the Commission but for the Commissioner.

We made Fred aware of the institutions' concerns, and since that time I believe that he has generally conducted himself consistent with the sensitivities of the institutional Presidents.

A committee was formed to review the reporting that the institutions made to the Commission. This committee was comprised of institutional representatives in the majority. Several reports that were superfluous, or obsolete, were recognized and abolished. The vast majority of the reports were required by either federal or state law. The annual program review which goes in a seven-year cycle was also placed under consideration for its cessation.

The frustrating part was that the institutions did not recognize, or chose not to recognize, the improvements that were made by the Commission, or else the door had already been closed and the die cast.

On top of this came the suggestion by the Commission to link funding to critical needs. In spite of numerous requests, and in fact pleading by your Chairman, the institutions absolutely refused to enter into any discussion, suggestions or recommendations that would link funding to critical needs. The decision by the Commission to adapt this stance was, in my opinion, a very responsible decision based on sound fiscal policy, and I have no regrets in my support of this decision. I then found myself being placed in a position of having to defend a body that did not and should not need defending. This was quite distasteful.

Shortly after assuming the Chairmanship, the Executive Committee of the Commission met with the Executive Committee of the Council of Presidents to discuss the proposal they had under consideration to organize to oppose the Commission. I stated at this meeting that I did not solicit my position on the Commission and as far as I knew at that time, none of the other members had actively pursued their position; that we served, often at considerable sacrifice of both time and finances, to work with the institutions to improve higher education in this state, and that I felt none of the members of the Commission in the slightest appeared interested in engaging in battle with the institutions. I continued to feel that way. And though I do not feel that an apology is necessary, I do regret that I was not able to stem the tide of the institutions against the Commission, even though in retrospect I do not see anything that I could have done differently.

One action that the Commission took when I was Chairman does, however, concern me. Knowing most of the Commission members' understanding of the responsibilities of a coordinating Commission, I felt confident that there was no desire on their parts to become a governing board, and yet I heard the majority of the members vote in favor of requesting certain powers that are clearly acts of governance. This concerns me, as I am somewhat fearful that there may have been an atmosphere of "getting even" at the institutions for the ordeal that members have been put through, individually and as a group, over the

past several months. Implications, accusations, and demands that were clearly false and without basis and entirely misleading, emanating from the institutions or their lobbyists or representatives, could not help but only aggravate and agitate. Any tendency toward revenge must be avoided for the benefits of Higher Education in this state. I say this not as a criticism or a warning, but merely to alert you to this possibility in your further deliberations.

After much thought, there is one suggestion that I would make for your future deliberations. I was a member of the Commission when the name of its Chief Executive Officer was changed from Executive Director to Commissioner, and since that time I have heard Fred referred to always as THE Commissioner of Higher Education. The connotation of this title implies by its very nature that our Chief Executive Officer can speak for the Commission, is the primary spokesman for Higher Education in the state, and is the leader of Higher Education. This is what is expected of him from many individuals and groups throughout the state. The reality of the situation is, however, that the Commission makes its own deliberations and speaks through the Commissioner, that the Commission is and should be the spokesmen for Higher Education, and that the Commission is and should be the leader of Higher Education as a system in this state. Therefore, I suggest that sometime in the future you consider changing the title of your Chief Executive Officer back to that of Executive Director.

Again, my warmest thanks for the honors that you have bestowed upon me and for allowing me this opportunity to clear the air about some of my feelings. In closing, I want to say that I have never worked with a staff that was as knowledgeable, energetic, willing, and concerned as this staff. Fred Sheheen's concern for Higher Education is surpassed by none; I could have asked for no one more cooperative or more receptive than Fred has been. On almost all occasions before stating opinions, responding to questions, or becoming involved in controversy, I received a telephone call from Fred asking for agreement or clearance, and he was always responsive to my answer.

And finally let me say that I have never served with a group of individuals who gave as much thought, study, and who spent so freely of their time as did my fellow members on the Commission. Concern typifies each and everyone of you. Public service is often unrewarding and unappreciated. In spite of this you have persevered and I salute you.

Thank you.