



UC Newsroom

Commission on future hears radical funding ideas

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By Harry Mok

Charging a fee to companies that hire university graduates and eliminating student fees were among the ideas the UC Commission on the Future heard at its meeting in Oakland on Thursday.

Launched in September, the commission's goal is to develop a new vision for the university that affirms its core values of excellence and access while addressing state funding cutbacks. The commission is drawing on experts from within and outside UC to help formulate its recommendations.

The commission heard from UC Berkeley economist Robert Reich, labor secretary in the Clinton administration, who floated the radical proposals for revamping how the university draws revenue.

Former UC presidents Richard Atkinson and David Gardner also offered suggestions for restructuring UC. Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California, discussed his group's report on state work force needs and the results of a statewide survey of opinions about higher education.

Reich said his ideas were ways to recapture the costs of UC's public service missions of educating students and providing research that solves problems.

"Is there any way, for example, of going to Sacramento and saying, 'We need a surcharge on companies over 5,000 employees,'" Reich said to the commission. "They're the beneficiaries of these public goods, and perhaps we want to reclaim some of the benefits for the source of the public goods."

Abolish fees?

Reich also raised the idea of doing away with student fees completely.

"Suppose the fee for attending the University of California was zero, but by contract every single graduate would be paying back X percentage of his or her earnings for the first Y number of years of full-time work," Reich said, calling it a form of an income-contingent loan.

California's supply of college-educated workers is not keeping up with demand, creating a skills gap that the state's colleges are hard pressed to fill given the current fiscal crisis, Baldassare said.

"Cuts in education funding work against the long-term interests of the state," Baldassare said.

One way to make obtaining a bachelor's degree more cost-effective is increasing the number of transfers from community colleges to four-year universities. Currently only 10 percent of community college students transfer to a university, Baldassarre said.

"California policymakers play a vital role in ensuring the future prosperity of the state through investment in the three higher education systems," Baldassare said. "We must work together on a plan that will strengthen and revitalize the California education system."

Low ratings for lawmakers

Californians give high grades to their public college and university systems, but they are worried about college costs and the impact of state budget cuts, according to survey results released by the Public Policy Institute of California on Thursday.

"People are concerned about increasing fees, admitting fewer students and reducing pay for faculty and staff," Baldassare said. "These are serious concerns."

The state's leadership received record low approval ratings for how they're handling higher education: 21 percent for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and 16 percent for the state Legislature.

Atkinson insights

Atkinson, who was president from 1995 to 2003, said the priority for UC is to maintain academic excellence. He suggested ways to raise revenue such as admitting more out-of-state students, who pay higher fees, and creating high-fee professional master's degree programs as long they were of UC quality.

UC campuses need to look for ways work together to become more efficient, Atkinson said. He also suggested that each campus experiment to find their own solutions, with the best ideas being adopted by others, becoming "one university with 10 different laboratories of innovation."

Atkinson said community college transfers are important for efficiency but also for helping to maintain a diverse student body. He suggested joint UC-community college courses and that some lower-division classes be offered systemwide, possibly taught over the Internet.

Gardner's perspective

Gardner, who was president from 1983 to 1992, offered a historical perspective to the commission on the state's Master Plan for Higher Education and the evolution of UC as a major research university as a lesson for the future.

Making major changes to how UC operates or to the Master Plan runs the risk of "undermining what makes the University of California great," Gardner said.

While the fundamental model should remain, there can be tweaks, Gardner said. He raised the possibility of offering three-year bachelor's degrees to reduce costs.

When asked about the appropriate size of enrollment during this fiscal crisis, Gardner said students cannot continue to bear the burden of rising costs through increased fees, but also suggested UC shouldn't admit more students than it can support.

Advocacy for UC in Sacramento and mobilizing grassroots supporters are key to the effort to obtain more funding from the state, both former presidents said. And with Gov. Schwarzenegger termed out, "We have to make sure the incoming governor understands the importance of UC," Atkinson said.

Representatives of the commission's five working groups, which are assessing UC's size and shape, education and curriculum, access and affordability, funding strategies and research strategies, gave updates on their progress. All have begun meeting, but there was concern that the March deadline to present findings was too tight.

Commission co-chair Russell Gould said that having concrete and tangible recommendations by March was important: "We've got to have some real meat."

Harry Mok is principal editor in the UC Office of the President's Integrated Communications group.