Advocacy for Good Times and Bad

by Anthony J. DiGiorgio

Early in my presidency at Winthrop University, I asked my leadership team to think beyond our extended campus community to identify groups who always would have a stake in Winthrop’s continuing progress.

In short order, we had list of more than 30 stakeholders, ranging from businesses that hire our graduates, to businesses that sell us supplies, to charities that benefit from our volunteer service, to families that attend concerts and athletics events, to local governments that benefit from the taxes we pay. But it was the newest member of the leadership team who identified the most important of stakeholders for Winthrop and, indeed, for all of public higher education, by asking this question:

Isn’t the future a stakeholder, too?

Indeed, the future remains arguably our most important stakeholder—the one shared by all the others.

Fast-forward to 2009, when that particular higher education stakeholder—the future—has more at risk than ever before, all across America, but particularly in South Carolina. The global economic crisis has hit public higher education with three simultaneous roundhouse blows: state appropriations are continuing in free fall, endowments have been deflated by plummeting stock values, and many families have been caught up in personal crises that mean tapping kids’ college funds to meet day-to-day expenses.

Yet concurrently, higher education in 2009 is universally recognized as one of the essential drivers for America’s economic recovery. Accordingly, the U.S. Congress, with encouragement from AASCU, responded quickly to the economic meltdown, fast-tracking approval of an emergency economic stimulus bill. Most states already are seeing that assistance arrive to help to stabilize state budgets and payrolls through aid to education. Most states, that is, except South Carolina, though our state already has the second-highest unemployment rate in the nation.

That’s because South Carolina has the only governor in America who is seeking to attach his own set of uniquely stringent (some say ill-conceived) conditions to allowing federal stimulus funds to reach public colleges, universities and K-12 schools. Interestingly, the leading opponents of the governor’s approach are S.C. state legislative leaders who also happen to share the governor’s party affiliation of record. Behind those legislative leaders is now organizing an array of statewide public education stakeholders, many recognizable from Winthrop’s list of long ago: business leaders, non-profit groups, as well as non-partisan and bi-partisan groups and citizens from all walks of life. All are unified by sharing one certainty: Public education—particularly higher education in the near term—is essential to returning economic and social progress to South Carolina.

Though the initiative is still young, it already is clear that all the time spent by Winthrop and peer institutions over the years in working with various stakeholders—forming and meeting with various external advisory groups, keeping stakeholders informed about initiatives and accomplishments, and working with them to advance their agendas whenever appropriate—has been an important investment that is now providing returns. These stakeholders see public education’s future as totally intertwined with the state’s prospects for recovery. Thus, they largely are pre-disposed toward helping keep South Carolina from becoming the only part of America not to allow this federal investment in recovery to be made in the urgent timeframe intended by Congress.

The weeks ahead undoubtedly will be one of the most critical and closely watched tests of public education advocacy ever. Stay tuned.