Meeting National Challenges in Higher Education

As I finish my 15th year as president of Stevenson University, I think about what a great honor it has been to lead such a dynamic institution.

It is a true inspiration to see the collaboration among our board, faculty, and staff who are working to create a university that is now becoming known from coast to coast.

Each winter, I attend a national meeting of college and university presidents where current issues facing higher education are discussed. I wanted to share some of these recent thoughts and observations. Colleges and universities have always been challenged by uncertainties. In the past, the issues were unique to the institution; one campus might have faced an enrollment decline while another could face accreditation problems. Today, however, the widespread challenges regarding resource uncertainty are affecting all of higher education and cover aspects from tuition concerns to the impact of the Internet on program offerings.

For example, the federal government has always been at the forefront of financial support to students attending various American colleges. Now, for myriad reasons, this support is being questioned. One reason is the record amount of money being spent at for-profit colleges that, unlike Stevenson University and others, do not provide meaningful educational experiences.

In addition, the other presidents and I spent a great deal of time discussing the future role of the Internet. It is pretty clear that technology will change the character of higher education during the next 10 years. The use of online instruction for adult students has been clearly established during the past 15 years, but we are beginning to see the integration of online study as part of the undergraduate experience.

Higher education has mostly enjoyed a high level of public support from both the media and families during the past 50 years. Yet we are beginning to see this support diminishing. We presidents discussed the uncertainty caused by the sharing of information through social networking among families and students. If anything, this rapid use of information will expand and create more pressure for universities.

As a final element of uncertainty, we are starting to see serious public concern about the long-term investment value of a college degree. Although this is not Stevenson’s belief, we presidents discussed the important role such opinions make in helping students and parents see value in the concept of higher education.

Such challenges have become a part of the day-to-day discussion of college and university presidents. Although we have always faced resource challenges on a case-by-case basis, they now will no doubt affect many of our institutions more broadly.

It might be helpful to reflect on how these challenges might affect Stevenson during the next 10 years. Because of strong leadership, going back to President Carolyn Manuszak and Academic Dean Rose Dawson, we have always been able to keep tuition in line with competitive institutions in order for us to grow and remain attractive.

Regarding online instruction, we have been a leader in providing this instruction in our School of Graduate and Professional Studies. These programs have been tremendously successful for adult students and we intend to dramatically expand these programs, already offering some to our undergraduates.

In terms of value, the centerpiece of what we do is the Career Architecture process, which is critical in that it speaks to the investment return of a good career path after graduation. It is significant that Career Architecture links all disciplines and schools at Stevenson, providing a distinctive twist in giving value to a Stevenson degree.

The recent meeting of presidents demonstrates the ongoing uncertainty higher education faces. Stevenson University is fortunate to be in a position to successfully handle these issues during the next several years. This success is certainly important for our students and for our faculty and staff. Together we want to continue to provide our students with a meaningful quality education that is reasonably priced and supports a long-term, post-college life.