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Declining enrollment mentioned as educators discuss problems

By Mary Fastenau

The questions came from across the nation, but the answers and discussion came from the studios of the Nebraska ETV Network in the first Satellite Teleconference

by representatives of the American Council on Education. The Tuesday afternoon program featured a call-in service which allowed administrators from around the country to ask the four panel members about higher education problems.

An earlier press conference allowed panel members to

give their views before appearing on television. Declining enrollment in colleges and universities was one problem mentioned by all panel members.

J.W. Peltason, president of the American Council on Education, said the decline is inevitable.

"The question is how will it (enrollment) decline, not if it will decline," he said.

Peltason, however, noted that drops in enrollment will affect colleges in different ways, depending on the type and location of the institution.

One response to the problem is for colleges and universities to seek new markets for education, he said, instead of modeling their programs just for 18- to 20-year-olds.

Carl Kaysen, professor of political economy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Vice Chairman and Director of Research for the Sloan Commission on Government and Higher Education, said he worries that competition within higher education for students will lead to "quality degradation" in education.

Legislative cuts

Kaysen said a decrease in students would prompt legislatures to cut appropriations, and this would lead to problems when administrators went to the legislators for emergency appropriations.

Although money is a problem, people also need to consider another issue—the increase of college-aged minority students-according to Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education and current president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Boyer said this issue raises a problem because minority students have traditionally had the least success in higher education because of their problems in high school. As an example, he said only 56 percent of all Hispanic students graduate from high school.

"For social reasons as well as survival, it would help if we worked at the pre-college level," Boyer said.

The problems with declining enrollment could also be

lessened if more people who started college finished, Boyer said. Now, only four of 10 people who start college graduate.

Reductions planned

Martha Church, president of Hood College, a women's school in Frederick, Md., said most colleges are planning to scale down their programs, concentrating on elimination of program duplication. She said colleges will follow Yale University, which announced it will be going from a "Cadillac to a Cadillac Seville."

Declining enrollment and the current economic situation will affect faculty, but Peltason said most administrators are worried about the decline in purchasing power and budget restrictions like California's Proposition 13. He said another problem is the surplus of prospective college teachers.

There are, however, some additional money sources, including "taxes, rich people and students," Peltason said. Church said faculty members at Hood College were

interested in additional fringe benefits because large salary increases put them in another tax bracket.

Although higher education appears plagued with problems, Peltason said he is confident that faculty and administrators remain concerned about education.

He said he thinks the United States has made a commitment to education and will continue to honor it. "I don't think there is a chance institutions will fall

into the hands of cold-blooded businessmen," he said. Church said that to keep government aware of educational developments, educators need to maintain personal contact with legislators.

Peltason agreed, saying, "Higher education must present its case to decision makers."

Because of the complex bureaucratic situation, he said educators must be available in "a lot of different arenas."

Kaysen voiced his opposition because of the relationship between education and the government. "We are a society which depends fairly heavily on the

educational world for detached criticism," he said. Kaysen predicted problems if the academic community became organized 'like the truckers and the farmers." For example, Kaysen said as an economist, he would not feel comfortable criticizing federal legislation if the government determined what happened in education.

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