

STATEMENT TO GOVERNOR AND LEGISLATURE OPPOSING ABOLITION OF THE COORDINATING FUNCTION IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

We vigorously oppose the proposal by the Governor that the coordinating function in Minnesota post-secondary education be abolished. The Governor and Legislature have an enormous challenge as it is in maintaining some sort of overall policy control over the systems of post-secondary education in this state without discarding the one element that is specifically designed to help them.

Moreover, at this moment in the state, with the Governor and Legislature seemingly forced to respond to crisis after crisis, they need more help in thinking ahead about what needs to be done, not less.

We aren't defending the existence of the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) as presently organized nor the size of its budget. It may be that structural reorganization is needed. Also its functions should be subject to the same critical budgetary scrutiny as other state functions. But we oppose abolishing the HECB without preserving the critically-important policy leadership role which it has carried out.

Minnesota has four strong, separate public systems of post-secondary education (the community colleges, the area vocational-technical institutes, the state universities, and the University of Minnesota), plus a host of private institutions. Unlike some states, Minnesota has avoided the creation of a super-board to run all public post-secondary institutions, preferring instead to build on the strengths of inter-institutional competition. As a result, Minnesota has a widely-respected post-secondary education system.

The HECB runs no institutions itself. Instead, it functions as an independent policy advisor to the Governor and Legislature, representing, in effect, the students and taxpayers, not the individual institutions. The predecessor to the HECB included both institutional and public representatives. Then in 1971, at our suggestion, the Governor and Legislature removed institutional representation from the policy body, to assure an independent voice for post-secondary education. In our report that year we noted that competing institutional representatives tended to "scratch each others backs," so to speak, rather than face directly the difficult issues concerning the coordination of their systems.

In 1977 we issued another report on post-secondary education in which we chided the HECB for not being more aggressive in coming to grips with future issues facing post-secondary education in Minnesota, particularly those con-

cerning the coming decline in numbers of persons in the traditional ages of post-secondary enrollment.

Ironically, the current proposal to abolish the HECB is coming at a time when it finally has brought forth aggressive, controversial proposals. For example, it recently has taken a strong position that tuition should be a certain percentage of operating expense (meaning that tuition would rise proportionately more in some institutions than in others) and that more state funds be channeled into **scholarships and grants**. **The HECB has been criticized by the various post-secondary systems for these positions.**

We believe the policy function is needed—not because we happen to agree with the controversial position now being taken by the HECB—but because the Governor and the Legislature urgently need an independent voice. If it carries out its function properly, the HECB never will be popular. It is inevitable that its recommendations often will be challenged by the various systems, which are very powerful in their own right. That is precisely why an **independent voice is needed.**

A great deal of courage is required for a public agency to take positions which are controversial. If HECB were to be abolished now, it is very likely that the message would be abundantly clear to any other agency which is considering **whether to make controversial proposals.**

If, as recommended by the Governor, the HECB were abolished, with its administrative functions (such as handling the loan and grant program) given to the Department of Administration, the savings would be \$2 million the upcoming biennium, or one-three-hundredths of the amount needed to balance the budget. Whether HECB is continued or not bears a negligible relationship to the issue of balancing the budget. We would be encouraged by proposals to restructure agencies to achieve greater efficiency, but this proposal simply abolishes the planning and policy function of the HECB.

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This statement was prepared by the Community Information Committee of the Citizens League. It is consistent with our 1977 report, *Declining Enrollments in Higher Education: Let Consumers Make the Choices*, and with our 1971 report, *An Urban College: New Kinds of Students on a New Kind of Campus*.