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AFFORDABILITY, DIVERSITY TOP IBHE AGENDA

SPRINGFIELD – Affordability and campus diversity – issues that have long occupied the higher education agenda – headline next week’s meeting of the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

The Board will receive a report placing Illinois in the context of recent national studies of college affordability, showing essentially that Illinois higher education fares well compared to some other states but also highlighting some worrisome trends. The annual study of underrepresented groups in higher education shows sustained growth in enrollments and degrees for blacks and Hispanics, and – in general – positive attitudes toward the campus climate for minorities. However, the report also notes concern about the availability of financial aid and minimal diversity of faculty and staff.

The Board will meet at 9 a.m., June 4, at the Illini Union on the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois.

The affordability report examines conclusions drawn in Losing Ground: A National Status Report on the Affordability of American Higher Education, published recently by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which also sponsored the first-ever national report card two years ago. Illinois was the top-ranked state on the report card and received an A in affordability.

Losing Ground singled Illinois out for its strong need-based financial aid program. A comparison with seven other large states found that:

- Illinois was below average in tuition and fee growth at community colleges, at the median for public universities, and above average for private four-year institutions.
- Illinois was in the upper half of the states on growth in median family income and state appropriations per student.
- Illinois was in the lower half of the states on growth of state grant aid per student, although Illinois’ commitment to need-based financial assistance was significantly
higher than the majority of the states, as measured by the ratio of state aid to federal Pel grants.

The report also documented trends that indicate “the cost of attendance is becoming relatively more expensive for Illinois residents.” It found that between 1992 and 2002, increases in tuition and fees outpaced growth in the Consumer Price Index and in state per capita disposable income. Average tuition and fees as a percentage of median income also increased from 1990 and 2000. The proportion of Illinois undergraduates who borrow to pay for college grew significantly at public and private four-year institutions during the 1990s, as did the average annual undergraduate loan amount in those two sectors.

The average Monetary Award Program grant as a percent of tuition and fees has remained relatively constant at public universities and community colleges, although not for students at private institutions.

The report is a prelude to a more comprehensive examination of the rising cost of a college degree to be undertaken in coming months.

The Underrepresented Groups Report noted continued progress in broadening college opportunities for minorities. Among the findings:

- Total black enrollment increased by 2.6 percent from 1999-2000. Between 1990 and 2000, black undergraduate enrollments grew 8 percent, and graduate enrollments rose about 55 percent.
- The number of Hispanic students increased 6.4 percent from 1999 to 2000, while during the decade, Hispanic undergraduate enrollments went up 67 percent, and graduate enrollments jumped 98 percent.
- The 1999-2000 increase in graduate enrollments – 5 percent for blacks, 9 percent for Hispanics – were the largest single year percentage gains since 1994.
- Between 1990 and 2000, total degrees awarded to black students increased by 39 percent, for Hispanics by 72 percent.

The report also examined the issue of campus climate. Among the general conclusions in the report:

- The vast majority of minority students had positive attitudes about the overall climate of their campuses.
- A large majority of underrepresented students believe that faculty treat all students the same.
- Underrepresented students expressed concern about a lack of diversity among faculty and other employees, and about prospects for financial aid.
• Although perceptions of the racial climate on campus were generally positive, many minority students noted that racial problems do exist.

• A majority of underrepresented students said their own attitudes toward people of different race or ethnicity had improved during the college years, but a significant percentage stated there had been no change of attitude.

Board members also will review a report that explores the question of degree-program approval in the context of worker shortages in various disciplines. The report examines the issue in the context of demographic trends and the changing workplace and concludes, among other things, that a worker shortage is, by itself, insufficient cause for expanding program offerings at colleges and universities because new program requests always assert a shortage of qualified workers. It also suggests that other considerations that will influence decisions for new programs include the changing nature of student populations; a learning environment in which not all students intend to pursue a degree; the fact that quality of education at all levels affects the state and national economies; and the effects of the job market in broadening the education marketplace, with a growth in proprietary institutions catering to preparing students for jobs in growth industries.

The report concludes that there is no easy or quick solution to worker shortages and cautions colleges and universities against radically altering their educational missions.

The Board meeting at the University of Illinois will be the first for newly appointed Chairman Steven H. Lesnik, who succeeds Philip J. Rock, and for Executive Director Daniel J. LaVista, who has replaced Keith R. Sanders. Lesnik will join the Joint Education Committee – comprised of officials from state education and workforce agencies and the Governor’s office – as a representative of the Board of Higher Education.