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WAYS & MEANS

Lawmakers Spotlight a Positive Measure of Public Spending on Higher Education

By PETER SCHMIDT

It's harder to complain that a glass is half empty when someone else is giving thanks that it's half full.

That's the hard political lesson being learned by some public-college associations as Congress debates the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the law that governs most federal student-aid programs.

Most of the associations want the government to spend substantially more on higher education and are arguing that state support has plummeted in recent years. But one of their key allies, the State Higher Education Executive Officers, complicated their efforts this month by saying in a report that state spending on colleges has kept pace with enrollment growth and inflation over the past 30 years.

The report wasn't entirely upbeat. It noted, for example, that recent state budget cuts have left public colleges with less state aid per full-time student than they were receiving in 1991.

Nevertheless, two Republican leaders of the House of Representatives' education committee, John A. Boehner of Ohio and Howard P. (Buck) McKeon of California, quickly issued a news release seizing on the report as evidence that public colleges are getting enough state aid and have been increasing tuition too much.

Paul E. Lingenfelter, the executive director of the group behind the report, says its findings "don't support the conclusion that [colleges'] spending and tuition are irresponsibly out of control." But some public-college lobbyists wonder if there is any way to reverse the spin that it has been given.

Travis J. Reindl, director of state-policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, called the Republicans' use of the report "an active example of how the law of unintended consequences never sleeps."

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