

Years in Review 2002 - 2008

2002-03 Year in Review

Starting in 2002, the public universities in the State of Alabama were actively involved on numerous statewide fronts.

First, through their individual efforts and the combined efforts of the Higher Education Partnership, the universities had the opportunity to establish a good working relationship with the administration of Governor Bob Riley. The Partnership was asked to coordinate a meeting between the administration and the university presidents. This meeting was a “get to know you” activity. The university leaders had the chance to hear from the new governor. They heard him say that he was committed to funding higher education because he believed the universities were instrumental in economic development.

The universities also began a collective effort to address what was predicted to be a call by legislative leaders for greater accountability. Subcommittees of university presidents and lobbyists met from November to Mid-January and hashed out a product that was submitted to a larger committee of education leaders from across the state. This combined education report was entitled Public Education: Standing at the Crossroads. It was released to legislative and administration leaders as a means of expressing the need for additional operational revenue at every level of public education.

The regular legislative session was practically void of action. With power struggles occurring in the Senate, the legislature did not get much accomplished. However, the Riley team worked with the newly formed organization, Campaign for Alabama, to develop a plan for introducing new revenue measures. The Campaign for Alabama group sought the universities input. The ideas developed by the group were turned into legislation.

The governor called a Special Session of the Alabama Legislature because he wanted to address the shortfall in education funding. The legislative package was taken from the work of the Campaign for Alabama staff. The Partnership had the privilege of being actively engaged in the special session process. The universities had to work hard to involve the entire higher education sector in the process. Certain issues like the scholarship plan had to be adjusted to meet individual university concerns.

After hundreds of efforts to count votes and massage the plan, the package was passed by the legislature and sent to the people for their approval. The package was expected to generate about 1.2 billion dollars.

Over the course of the summer, Alabama’s universities, under the combined leadership of the Higher Education Partnership and local campus committees, hosted nine political rallies and numerous campus events in support of Amendment One. The rallies generated over 20,000 participants and hundreds of television, radio and newspaper stories. The rallies were one of the highlights of a difficult campaign. They were successful in building support for the plan. However, they were also important for strengthening the message that Alabama’s public universities are a voice to be counted in political circles.

In spite of the massive effort to pass the amendment, the plan failed. With the defeat of Amendment One, the state legislature faced a terribly difficult task of reducing the budget. While the level of funding provided to every entity was reduced, the universities also were forced to absorb two unfunded mandates. The universities had to accept responsibility for covering the health insurance costs of their retirees. Plus, the state universities experienced an increased obligation for the

cost of active retirees. The legislature changed the funding formula which ultimately resulted in the universities having to pay more for retirees.

While the universities appreciated the efforts of the Riley Administration to provide equitable treatment for all of education, public education still experienced significant budgetary and program related challenges. The universities acknowledged the effort to maintain level funding for operations and maintenance; however, faculty, staff and students experienced pain from the cuts to important line items and the multiple unfunded mandates.

When the bottom-line of the new budget was calculated, the universities, as a whole, actually received a reduction from their available operations and maintenance funding of approximately four percent. When line items were added, some individual institutions even experienced greater cuts.

2004 Year in Review

As the fall of 2003 turned into the winter of 2004, the university community and others in public education found themselves, once again, addressing the challenges of a bleak economic forecast for the next fiscal year's budget. Further, the call for increased accountability returned.

The student community was organized early in 2004 by the efforts of the Partnership. Student leaders that had attended the 2003 STARS Retreat in record numbers were called to action. They were asked to attend a special recognition program highlighting their efforts to support K-12. Further, they were asked to actively communicate the importance for having a large crowd at Higher Education Day.

Alumni leaders from across the state were also actively engaged in the advocacy process. With the first of what is expected to be an annual alumni leaders conference, the association was able to deliver multiple copies of an advocacy report that had been produced. The keynote speaker was Lt. Governor Lucy Baxley.

Higher Education Day was, as usual attended by an energized, enthusiastic crowd. Over 1800 people braved the difficult weather conditions and sent a strong message of the importance of higher education. Legislative leaders and constitutional officials offered remarks to the crowd.

The 2004-05 budget that was developed by the legislature was not favorable to the state's universities. Due to the depleted level of funding and the need to restore funding to K-12 transportation, textbooks and the "Reading Initiative," the universities found their percentage of the new dollars was hurt.

In addition, the effort to create "accountability" in higher education was based on an attempt to strengthen the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. The Partnership took the position that it supported accountability as long as it strengthened the universities' ability to serve their mission. In the end, the legislation did not pass.

The summer of 2004 provided extended opportunities for the Partnership to work with campus leaders. The development of campus leadership councils and an associational annual report has received specific attention. Also, Gordon Stone, Executive Director, has been asked to serve as a member of the Blackbelt Commission and as chair of the Technical Advisory Committee. This effort should create greater public awareness of the importance of higher education in bettering the lives of the people of Alabama.

2005 Year in Review

In 2005, the Partnership worked on the 2006 FY budget. The university community decided to take a new approach, utilizing the University Presidents' Council. The presidents of the universities established a plan to change the

way they requested funding from the legislature. They decided to not ask for a percentage increase, but, instead, to ask for four priorities to be funded: a) start with the previous year's funding level as the base, b) provide sufficient funding for retiree health insurance and employee retirement, c) provide a funding pool sufficient to achieve the same percentage of raises at all levels of education, K-Ph.D., and d) include the universities in a bond issue if one was proposed.

The legislative session began well because the Riley Administration recommended exactly what was requested. The Partnership was pleased to see this significant improvement over the events of the last few decades. A tremendous crowd of 2500+ people attended Higher Education Day 2005 to show their appreciation to the governor for the proposals.

During the rally and the well-attended Alumni Leaders Advocacy Network banquet, held on the eve of Higher Education Day, the university attendees heard leaders of the House of Representatives and the Senate make commitments to provide what the universities requested. Thankfully, the requests of the higher education community were granted. The success could not have been reached without the strong respect of the legislative leaders, especially Senator Jim Prueitt. A true sign of higher education's increased level of respect was seen in the fact that the newspapers accused the university community of shutting down the legislative process in order to achieve its desired outcome. The Partnership was a visible player on television, in the newspaper and in providing research to support the work in the legislature.

In late 2005, the STARS Retreat was moved to Fort Walton, Florida and experienced a new level of interest. Featured speakers for the 2005 retreat included individuals from the Blackbelt. They told stories about their region of the state and about the opportunities available to assist. The STARS Committees from each campus agreed to collect school supplies to send to the area. In January, a successful event was held where the supplies were delivered to Hale County. At the event a panel of Blackbelt representatives led by Judge Sonny Ryan shared insights on the area.

2006 Year in Review

The 2006 Higher Education Day had the second largest crowd in the history of the event. More than 2600 individuals were in attendance. They heard from the normal group of legislative leaders, Governor Riley and Lt. Governor Baxley. Plus, they had the opportunity to, once again, enjoy the free BBQ and to socialize with the legislative leaders. A new feature of the 2006 event was the pre-rally legislative roundtables hosted by the faculty senate presidents.

The 2006 year was unique because the state had more new revenue and another strong budget recommendation from the Riley Administration. However, as the session unfolded, the revenue projections grew, so the universities increased their requests. The additional funding was achieved because of the support of key legislative leaders. One reason for the university success was the strong level of teamwork and cooperation between the increasingly active alumni network, the growing strength of the faculty participation and the dedication of the students. The Alumni Leaders Advocacy Banquet also had record attendance.

2007 Year in Review

With the funding cycle still holding on, 2007 will be a good year for Alabama's public universities. The national economy was showing signs of decline. However, the impact in Alabama was not yet being felt. The Partnership held another successful Higher Ed Day and was able to rally a crowd of over 2000 at the State House. While some signs of difficulty did

present themselves in the level of discord that was developing between various members of the Alabama Legislature, there was little impact on the public universities. In other areas of significance, the board of directors was presented with a proposal to redo their dues structure. Since the Partnership had not experienced an increase for the sake of operations since it was organized, the board approved this new structure.

On the grassroots level, the STARS Blackbelt Project continued to serve through Academic Premiere Days and the “What’s good about K-12 Schools” project.

The 2007 Alumni Leaders’ Advocacy Banquet was a success. The attendance continued to climb. Lt. Governor Jim Folsom, Jr. was the keynote speaker. As expected, the STARS Retreat included an even larger role for the faculty, staff and alumni groups. The retreat, held at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort and Spa was a huge success.

2007 also allowed the Partnership to celebrate its 10th anniversary. As part of the 10th anniversary recognition at the Alumni Leaders’ Advocacy Banquet, Gordon Stone was presented a leadership award.

2008 Year in Review

In 2008, the economic crisis finally hit Alabama and the university budget passed by the legislature was not good for higher education. The universities who had received over 30 percent in the 2008 budget (as passed by the 2007 legislation) took a dramatically different result in the 2009 budget. The budget originally proposed by Governor Riley and ultimately approved by the legislature in a special session saw the universities take a drastic 11 percent cut in overall funding. This was due to an aggressive posturing by the K-12 lobby that truly painted universities as overzealous and greedy. The Partnership, along with advocacy groups on every campus countered with op-eds, letters-to-the-editor, television interviews, etc. The Partnership even developed a DVD to be used at Civic Club functions - *“Higher Education: It’s Not Just Valuable to Alabama. It is Vital.”* The Partnership also took out statewide newspaper ads to support the importance of public universities. Higher Ed Day had tremendous attendance. The theme was “Education - Equity - Excellence.” The Alumni Leaders’ Advocacy Banquet continued to be a big success. The speaker was Senator Hinton Mitchem, President Pro-Tempore of the Alabama Senate. The legislative session did provide for an interesting show of influence by the universities. The institutions were able to stall and eventually see the Regular Session end without a budget that was a terrible proposal for 2009 higher education appropriations. However, during the Special Session, the budget that was eventually passed still had a drastically negative impact on universities. The ultimate result is the continued growth in the tuition costs at the universities.

The 2008 STARS Leadership and University Advocates’ Conference registration was strong. Plus, new Chair of the Board, Lori Owens, successfully led an effort to restructure the content of the Board.

Finally, 2008 also saw the developing of the 10th Anniversary Cookbook. It communicated the Partnership’s progress, featured prominent alumni of all 13 universities and was masterfully produced by Diane Causey.