

Chancellor Wells part of White House briefing on higher-ed 'Blueprint'

by Alex Hummel - Friday, February 03, 2012

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As President Obama unveiled his bold new "[Blueprint for Keeping College Affordable and Within Reach for All Americans](#)" on Jan. 27, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells found himself at the epicenter of the resultant conversation: The White House.

It was a whirlwind 24 hours for higher-education policy in the United States and Wells. His trip to Washington D.C. for the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) took a surprising turn when he ended up representing the AAC&U at a Jan. 27 White House roundtable briefing with the president's higher-educational policy staff.

The briefing followed the introduction of President Obama's Blueprint proposal, first referenced during his State of the Union address on Jan. 24. The president went into greater detail during a Jan. 27 speech at the University of Michigan, outlining how the distribution of student aid in the form of "Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), Perkins Loans, and Work Study" programs, according to a White House fact sheet, would be connected to institutions' strides in cutting student costs and increasing access. The proposal would boost this support to \$10 billion.

The Blueprint also proposes a new \$1 billion pool of incentives for states that do more to "contain tuition and make it easier for students to earn a college degree" while maintaining adequate state funding levels for higher education.

A third, funding component proposes an additional \$55 million in investment for public and private institutions that "develop the next breakthrough strategy that will boost higher education attainment and student outcomes."

At the White House policy briefing on Jan. 27, Wells filled in for AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider, past recipient of a UW Oshkosh honorary doctorate degree. Wells serves on the AAC&U's, American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) and American Council on Education's (ACE) boards of directors. He ended up being the only current university chancellor or president at the feedback session table.

"We are grateful to have a president who, faced with a host of economic challenges, is making higher education part of the solution and a national priority," Wells said.

"The President is also to be commended for providing an inclusive forum for higher educational leaders to rightly share questions, concerns and solutions regarding the tone and details of his proposal as it moves forward – namely, what steps will be taken to assure all the right stakeholders are involved in this initiative," he said. "Students, state legislatures, Governors and University faculty and staff are all key

stakeholders in the higher educational system, and they need to share in the responsibility and accountability to make affordable, higher-quality education available to more Americans.”

About 10 national higher education organizations and associations were represented around the White House briefing table on Jan. 27, Wells said. Representatives of the administration’s higher-education policy staff and Department of Education Under Secretary Martha Kanter led the hour-and-a-half-long feedback session.

Wells applauded President Obama’s commitment to continue to obtain feedback from stakeholders as the Blueprint proposal progresses. He said participants in the Jan. 27 session stressed the need to improve quality of, not just cost of or access to, higher education. Students’ success must be one of the most important benchmarks, he said.

“This cannot be over-emphasized: Improved educational quality must be the key driver of the President’s Blueprint initiative,” Wells said. “Better educational quality leads to a better subsidized price for a better price-value for students and, ultimately, a better quality of life for more Americans.”

Beyond its three-pronged outlay of incentives, the president’s proposal also calls for creation of a new “College Scorecard” for all institutions, “making it easier for students and families to choose a college that is best suited to their needs, priced affordably and consistent with their career and educational goals,” according to the White House’s Blueprint fact sheet.

“The Essential Student Learning Outcomes and related rubrics developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) in partnership with faculty, higher educational and business leaders throughout the nation should also be used to anchor accountability measures for improving the quality of learning,” Wells said. ([Click here to learn more about UW Oshkosh’s Essential Student Learning Outcomes and Liberal Education Reform Team initiative](#)).

Wells said the scorecard concept would work best if it authentically measures the improved performance of each of the distinct actors in the higher education equation, from state governments to students. He proposes a “Stakeholders Scorecard” holding each partner accountable while sharing responsibility and ensuring success.

“The Stakeholder Scorecard needs to fairly score us all, from the state and federal price- subsidizers to the keepers-of-the-cost such as faculty and administrators,” he said.

With respect to the on-campus “keepers-of-the-cost,” leaders involved in the College Portrait of Undergraduate Education and its Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) are pointing to their own informative and equitable reporting scorecard system as a model. The VSA transparently provides a wealth of college and university data from more than 300 participating institutions, including UW Oshkosh, to help prospective students and families choose the best-fitting, higher-education institution to attend.

In a Feb. 1 statement, College Portrait Executive Director Christine Keller pointed to the VSA as a model to help President Obama and advisors shape the new scorecard.

“Through the College Portrait website, users already have access to a range of important data elements and tools that can assist them in selecting the college that best meets their needs – including cost of attendance, net price estimates, success/progress rates, financial aid, student involvement, and learning outcomes,” Keller said. “With 320 institutions participating, we believe we have demonstrated what can be accomplished through a voluntary effort by the public higher education community.” ([Click to see UW Oshkosh’s College Portrait](#)).

Wells added that it is “critically important” that all stakeholder group leaders also consult Jane Wellman’s and colleagues’ [Delta Project on Postsecondary Education Costs, Productivity and Accountability](#). “As described at its website, the project ‘has organized data on operating spending and revenues into aggregate measures of costs per student and costs per degree/certificate produced, organized into Carnegie classifications separating public and private nonprofit institutions.’”

President Obama’s proposal also calls for Congress to maintain low interest rates on student loans, enhance and make permanent existing student tax credits created under his administration and double the number of work study jobs. UW Oshkosh’s [innovative Student Titan Employment Program](#) has provided high-impact, learning opportunities for approximately 250 students. It is just one University program that helped infuse the student population with more than \$5 million in annual wages in 2011, or, on average, more than \$3,000 per student for about 1,750 students, equivalent to one semester’s tuition.

The president’s package of reforms has triggered a range of responses reactions from higher education leaders around the United States.

In a statement, Muriel Howard, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and another honorary doctorate recipient from UW Oshkosh, applauded the president’s challenge to state legislatures to do their part and enhance funding for higher education.

However, Howard echoed other higher education leaders’ concerns about directly tying federal support to cost controls.

“While I understand his viewpoint, public institutions in 40 states do not have complete control of their pricing,” Howard said. “Harming students at these institutions because of decisions made beyond the control of their college or university is an obstacle to keeping the American promise. We concur that controlling costs and seeking efficiencies is important, and AASCU institutions have numerous success stories to tell despite dealing with draconian state funding cuts.”

In a statement, American Council on Education President Molly Corbett Broad also expressed concerns about an increasing level of Congressional control in the day-to-day affairs of college and university campuses. However, Corbett Broad also welcomed the opportunity to work with political leaders to expand access to higher education and improve affordability.

“It is clear the administration recognizes that colleges and universities play a vital role in economic recovery and expansion—this is perhaps the defining issue of our time,” Corbett Broad said. “As President Obama noted in his speech, ‘There is no greater predictor of success, than education.’ We strongly agree. We are committed to working with the administration and Congress to make certain that affordable, high-quality, higher education is available to all Americans and that colleges and universities are accountable

for every dollar they receive."

Read more:

- [Video and full statement -- Chancellor Wells: Better education, better subsidized price, better life for more Americans](#)