
PROLOGUE

“Red-Railers,” arise! Your number has been called.

The major portion of this issue of *Sooner Magazine* is devoted to “The Future of Higher Education in Oklahoma.” The topic was not selected lightly. The time has come to discuss exactly what the state wants from its universities and colleges and what it is willing to pay for.

In 1990 the Legislature bit the bullet and raised taxes to fund House Bill 1017, a giant step forward for Oklahoma public schools K-12; the following year state voters turned down an attempt to repeal 1017. Higher education forces strongly supported 1017 as the sensible place to start the revitalization process but certainly not the place to stop.

Chancellor of the State Regents Hans Brisch and the boards of regents for both the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University now are proposing the logical next step, a 1017 for universities and colleges. Logical, perhaps, but approval will not come quickly or easily.

While voters were reaffirming 1017 in 1991, they also approved State Question 640, a measure that requires a super-majority of the Legislature or, more realistically, a vote of the people for nearly all revenue measures. To garner this type of widespread support for higher education will require an impressive amount of public education of another kind.

The relationship of the public schools to their communities is very personal. Almost every citizen in every community can identify with the public school experience; teachers and administrators are friends and neighbors; students are somebody's children and grandchildren; the school itself is often a center of community activity. Not always so with colleges and universities. There may be popular identification with the athletic fortunes of the institutions or curiosity about the misdeeds of college students or the

endless audits that seem the order of the day, but the real business of universities is of less widespread interest.

Hans Brisch, an optimistic sort, travels the state telling anyone who will listen why higher education is vital to Oklahoma, ticking off the many points of pride within the system that somehow escape general notice. Brisch believes that more support exists for higher education than is generally supposed. At least he is ready to lay the issue on the table to see what happens.

Let's hope the chancellor is right, but just to be safe, he and his colleagues in higher education could use some local help from those who have the world's best reason for being higher education's advocates: the alumni. They are the doctors; lawyers; dentists; teachers; pharmacists; veterinarians; elected officials; and business, civic and church leaders who make the cities and towns of Oklahoma go. They are taxpayers and opinion-makers but a largely untapped resource for the institutions that helped shape their lives.

They tell me that in the east-side student section at OU home football games the occupants of the donor chair-backs under the west-side deck have been dubbed “The Red-Railers,” identifiable by the barrier that separates them from the lower rows and by a tendency to remain seated and silent. Having paid dearly for the accommodations, these athletic red-railers have every right to sit back and smile if they prefer. But there are other red-railers in our midst who received much more than they paid for from their college experience. When it comes to public support of a long-overdue initiative for higher education, there couldn't be a better time for them to stand up and cheer.

—CJB