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Education

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Those presiding over higher education in North Dakota have a genuine concern for the state’s students and how education plays a role into the growing economic base. Several executives representing higher education recently met at the Harold Schafer Leadership Center at the University of Mary to discuss the challenges facing North Dakota’s higher education system and ways in which they can manage the growth.

Connie Brennan, publisher and editor-in-chief of North Dakota Business Magazine, served as moderator for the roundtable. These monthly meetings, sponsored by the North Dakota Department of Commerce, are designed to bring leaders together to discuss issues pertinent to their industries. Following is a condensed version of the roundtable discussion.

**What is the biggest challenge for higher education in North Dakota?**

**Kirsten Diederich:** In my opinion, it’s education, not of our students, but of the citizens of North Dakota, as to what it is we actually do and what we have accomplished. I don’t think we’re getting our message out to the public, which makes them a little bit nervous about what it is we do and how much money we’re spending. So, there’s a little bit of a trust and respect issue that follows along with that.

**Dean Bresciani:** I’d concur with that, although I’d add on the potentials of higher education in this state and the misunderstanding that public higher education is a cost rather than an investment. Yet the public understands that higher education is one of the leading economic engines of the state. In North Dakota, I don’t think the average citizen appreciates that higher education is an opportunity.

**Bob Badal:** I think affordability is a big challenge in North Dakota. We lose a lot of students from high school who go out of state. It’s partly because our state grant program is relatively weak, even though it has been increased in recent years. There’s been a tendency to favor low tuition at the public universities rather than investing in students who need support and giving them the support they need to attend college, whether it’s public or private, but here in North Dakota.

**John Richman:** We’re at a 28-year high in total head-count enrollment. **Gary Hagen:** We’re at an all-time record high in enrollments; probably a 30 percent increase in the last few years. We don’t know if there’s enough dormitory space in the fall.

**Larry Skogen:** Our enrollment last year went down 8 percent in North Dakota males. When you’re this close to the oil field, it seems kind of obvious why that happened. But, all indicators are that we’re coming back up for this next year. Last year we took a hit and I directly tie it to the oil development.

**Raymond Nadolny:** Three years ago, we trained 3,000 people. This year, we’re probably going to end up with 10,000 people in terms of our contract training in the workforce. There are a lot of different pieces that we do in higher education. Everyone here is pretty much thriving. We’re getting bigger cities, richer cities. We have a wealthy, healthy state. There’s probably no more exciting place to be.

**Duaine Espegard:** Enrollment increases have its challenges. Enrollment that’s too fast and unfettered results in difficulty in keeping up with the funding and that’s been giving us some trouble in the last few years. So, while enrollment is a positive thing, funding it is sometimes very difficult.

**How do you manage the growth?**

**Espegard:** That’s another issue. It’s probably something we have not done, and I think we need to do that. We need to manage the growth in such a way that we can afford it. You do that by creating higher standards. I do believe we have a wonderful system here in the state; a university system that I think people ought to pay
for. We have to manage growth because growth is reality, particularly in our two-year schools now. But, in our research schools, we’re getting growth that’s out-reaching our legislative funds.

Richman: There’s a misconception within the state that the funding formula follows the student. So, as enrollment goes up, more funding is provided, and that’s not our current funding model. That’s the challenge we’re faced with. Yes, we get more tuition with more students, but the tuition is only a portion of the revenue that we need to pay for the full cost of educating that individual.

Espegard: That is exactly right. As we look at funding models and things like that, we have to look at it from a system-wide organization. If we have a good education, we can’t give it away. We have to charge for it and get back to something of a standard. A new funding model, which they’re working on now, will be certainly appreciated and very timely.

How do you make education a priority for students that could potentially make good money right out of high school?

James Shea: That’s an enrollment challenge for all of us, at least in the western part of the state, to make the case for a young 18-year old that they should come and spend money to go to a university when, in fact, they can jump in a truck and make a whole lot more. But, they’re not going to want to do that forever. They’re going to want to build a life. They’re going to want to get married or settle down. At that point, an education is going to be essential for them. I think we need to find new ways to deliver that type of education as well. That old model of convincing that 18-year old to come and spend four years here isn’t going to work for every student. We need to find new ways and we need to be responsive to that need particularly.

Richman: We thought we would see a decline this year, particularly with our recruiters in the western part of the state. While the data isn’t complete yet, our recruiters in the western part of the state saw more prospective students this year that we’ve ever seen before. I ask that very question, “Why?” Our thought was they were going to go work in the oil fields. Our recruiters believe it’s to get that done. A lot of them are going to come back in time. I think there will be different kinds of challenges, more education demands for the oil field as it gets drilled out, if you will, and moves toward the better jobs that are going to be out there.

Nadolny: You’re absolutely correct. In Williams County, in two years we added 450 businesses. That means you have 450 supervisors, managers, and, as that continues at that pace, we see the demands for associate, baccalaureate, all those pieces. We built a $10 million residence hall that opened in the fall. As of a couple months ago, we were full. Where do people have the opportunity to go? The state has a lot of avenues to attend higher education. I really do believe that this is benefiting everyone and it will continue to benefit everyone.

Steve Shirley: Part of it is where we’re located in the state and who our demographic or student is. Our students from Lisbon or Milnor, who’s 18 and wants to be a teacher or wants to go on to professional school, they’re not thinking about the oil patch. That isn’t really a trade-off to them. That’s never been on their radar. It may have, certainly, some impact and we’re losing some of those students, [but] we’ve got an all-time record enrollment this last fall. We’re not seeing those students making that either/or decision.

Badal: The state has an inherent conflict of interest about higher education. I’m at a traditional liberal arts, highly residential college where we try to teach people how to live, not how to make a living. The state is way too wrapped up in workforce development. I don’t have to spend a lot of time at the legislature or at those public board meetings, but when I’m there, workforce development seems to be the most important topic of all. Frankly, as much as I understand what’s happening with the economic
vitality of this state, those of us at Jamestown College believe in broadly education our students and preparing them for whatever comes down the road. We know the economic story is people with four-year degrees who are well prepared are going to be successful. That's why I know, in our case, and I think for many of our institutions, at a time when much of the country is suffering with unemployment, we have a 99 percent placement rate. That has a lot to do with these employers who are hungry for college graduates. I get a little troubled when I see young people getting mixed messages about what their future is all about. The state needs to do a better job of convincing young people that education is the future, not just getting a job. That is a short-term approach to life. Frankly, as an educator, as somebody who believes in the value of the liberal arts, I don't mean that in terms of education for its own sake. I mean how that prepares you for the world of work but also for the broader aspects of life.

**Diederich:** To take that a step further, I'm wondering if there's an area in there where the business could come and we could partner with them a little bit more. I know that Dr. Nadolny is dealing with that a little bit in Williston when these oil companies comes in and they're saying, "We don't want just trained individuals. We want somebody who's educated on top of that." I'm not saying that if you're trained, you're not educated. We've got to be very careful with that. But, they do want somebody with a certificate or a degree of some type. If the business could help in that area, that would be advantageous.

**Nadolny:** There's no better place in this country to get an education than in North Dakota. If you're from California, New York, no better place than North Dakota, because we have opportunity. You get your liberal arts education here, you get opportunity. You get workforce training, you get opportunity. No other place in the 50 states is a better place to get higher ed. than here. That's exciting.

**How do we get more involved in education?**

**Diederich:** We had a roundtable that was put in place to have the businesses come in and talk about the education system and tell them what it is that they're looking for and what direction to go. I'm not sure if the momentum is still there.

**Espegard:** I agree with you. The momentum is off in that, although I think it was a real good effort. It brought the business folks together with the academia and the various colleges to see what kind of a footprint we could put out going forward. It's fallen off a bit and it's probably gotten a little old. In some cases, it really hasn't had its emphasis from the leaders that it probably should have had. I think it needs to be rejuvenated. It was collaboration between business and education and it was very well done but it probably wasn't followed up as much as it should have been in the last few years.

**Nadolny:** Williston State works with over 300 businesses. I know the same goes for the people around this table. This state has people with rural family values, it is a clean state. It is a beautiful state; it is a state that has the kind of people you want to hire. When I moved to the West Coast, I remember people always saying, "Hire people from the Midwest, strong work ethic." That's no truer than in North Dakota. There are so many advantages to being in this state. There are so many reasons why businesses want to come here. The one thing about our legislature, they are very business friendly and that helps us. I think we just have the greatest mix in terms of higher education opportunity and a lifestyle here that is incredible.

**Al Anderson:** I think there have been a lot of changes in the last few years, too, between industry and education. I see some really good partnerships that exist with industry, whether it's at NDSU on the research side, or NDSCS on the preparation for some of the skilled workers in other areas, where industry partners are working very closely. It's an exciting time from that standpoint. The other part, though, is that the workforce development is not pushing people into a certain area. I don't think that's the state's approach. The state's approach is more of one of helping the youth going with their eyes wide open. When we have things like career conversations, it's not to try to push people. It's just to allow them to know what the opportunities are going to be for them once they go to school and try to get that excitement going so they end up where they want to be down the road.

**Nadolny:** In six years, our school districts will triple in the northwest part of North Dakota and that means that when you think about that, when you think about the wave of young people that are going to be flooding into our university system, it is going to be a wave and it's a very exciting wave. Right now they're moving into the grade schools and middle schools and we're starting to see that happen at the high school, but there is a wave of young people coming because of all the opportunities in the state. The 11 institutions and the private colleges have just tremendous opportunity in the years ahead of us.

**Espegard:** That's a reversal from what it has been. Not very long ago we had
Do students entering college require substantial remedial education?

Espegard: Some 30 percent [need remedial education], I believe. I don’t know how normal that is compared to other states. It seems to me, that is awfully high. One of the other things is that the scores in which they come in are pretty low and their chances of survival with the low scores are not good and they leave us.

Shea: We’re talking about 30 percent of students coming into the university system requiring developmental courses. I’d be interested in hearing how we balance that against the question of access. If we begin talking about the importance of education and we say that there are so many students graduating from high school in North Dakota who aren’t college-prepared, do we solve that problem simply by saying, “You can’t come to college,” or are there other ways? It becomes a question of the integrity of education K through 12 and K through 16 and beyond as well. How do we keep the quality of our institutions high, do justice to the students so that we’re not wasting their time and money and their parent’s time and money and, at the same time ensuring access to an important commodity in the life of a young person and something that’s really needed in our state.

Espegard: I truly believe that access to all students is very important. I think working with K-12 and making sure they’re better prepared is probably the best thing we could do. I do believe that every student in North Dakota, every young person in North Dakota, deserves an education. A lot of times we take in students that never finish college. Maybe it’s too tough for them or whatever the deal is; we need to make sure that they’re ready to come to and finish college. There’s some work to be done.

Richman: One of the best things that the North Dakota University System allows to happen is collaboration. The five, two-year colleges, the four regional colleges, the two research institutions and the 11 campus leaderships sit at the same table every month to allow that access to happen. We all have programs, ours with NDSU, the Pathway Program. Students that they deny because they’re not academically capable coming out of high school are encouraged to enter the Pathway Program. They’re on the NDSU campus, but they’re our students working in our developmental programs, trying to build their academic skills to the level that they then can be successful at NDSU. I agree with you. We’ve been so focused on access that our retention rates, our graduation rates have dropped. I think the shift needs to go from access to attainment. How do we set this student’s success path, no matter what it is, K-12 to two-year, to four-year, to technical, to a PhD? How do we get that student a success path so they can attain the educational level they desire to have?

Hagen: Remediation is a tough topic. It’s caused by different things, I suppose, but we have students in small schools in our region that take their math [and] in their junior or senior year, particularly their senior year, there isn’t any to take. They get rusty for a year. So, dual-credit opportunities allow these students to take additional math, more advanced, and writing and whatever. Many of those have said, “Boy, I’m sure glad I took that dual credit. I was ready or I probably would have needed to have some remediation as well.” Part of it is a function of what can be offered and is offered. It’s not hard to offer dual-credit courses once you establish those relationships and partnerships.

How much collaboration goes on between public and private universities?

Skogen: Father Shea and I are working together. We just did a musical here in town for the community and it was great.

Shea: It was good. It’s been great working with Dr. Skogen at Bismarck State. We’ve reached out to other people as well but it’s been beyond the borders of North Dakota. We just announced a major partnership with Alexandria Tech and we’re working with Arizona State University to offer majors and minors right there at their campus in fields of study they don’t offer. I think it is important that the publics and the privates collaborate in terms of talking about these issues and then tackling them as well. That’s important.
Diederich: On the eastern part of the state, Concordia College collaborates with NDSU and Minnesota State-Moorhead now. We have a tri-college system. We’ve just developed a minor in vaccinology between the three universities. They can be a Concordia student but they’re taking courses over at NDSU.

Badal: It’s a good level of collegiality among all the institutions in the state. At the same time, we always feel that there are things we can work on. We certainly are interested in working with the two-year schools in the state and we’re trying to develop stronger ties there for students who are looking for four-year degrees after completing their programs. This is a state where it’s fairly easy to pick up the phone and talk to colleagues and discuss different ways of collaborating and tying things together. I feel very good about that.

Shea: The key to collaboration between private and public and between any of our institutions is to place the student in our communities as the center of the conversation. In other words, as long as our primary interest is the good, prospering and the flourishing of our students in the communities we serve, our institutional egos, we’re able to set them aside and work together for the good of all. That’s really important and it’s as essential in this moment in our state’s history as ever.

Hagen: Collaboration takes many forms though, even athletically. We need James-town because if you have to travel farther and farther for athletics, those are real dollars. They have to come out of somewhere. You don’t want to take them out of your academic mission. The more we work together, there’s lots of ways you can get efficiency through your dollars. There’s a lot of need to explore those and keep those going. One of the groups that’s missing here is the tribal colleges. We’ve got United Tribes right here in Bismarck. All of us at some level have some sort of collaboration and relationship with one of the tribal colleges, there’s a lot of collaboration between them as well. Tribal colleges are really important and they serve a very distinct, important role in our state relative to helping people work their way out of poverty and in a disadvantaged environment. It’s really important that we recognize the role that tribal colleges play in this whole thing.

Anderson: It’s a fun time to be in North Dakota. Part of that is with the success of industry in North Dakota. They’ve done things like the Succeed 2020 where the Hess Corporation has donated $25 million over the next five years specifically to help advance and improve the K-12 education system. It’s getting people to collaborate, even outside the university system, with the university system to resolve some of these problems. There’s going to be a lot more things that need to be done but that focus on the STEM courses, science, technology, engineering and math, is definitely something that helps on the preparation for the furthering of education. It’s sometimes misunderstood in the public standpoint how much collaboration actually goes on. With the focus on how you prepare students for the future, not everybody is providing the same services. They’re providing areas of study that aren’t necessarily competing. There’s some that do compete a bit, but it’s not all 11 universities or the private universities. A good example that just jumps out is that North Dakota is looking very closely at the unmanned air system, trying to develop an additional industry to broaden the base of North Dakota. To do that, the University of North Dakota is very involved in the aviation side. They’re partnering with Northland Community College for the technical side of it. The public doesn’t see that very often. They don’t understand how much is going on with the discussions.

“As long as our primary interest is the good, prospering and the flourishing of our students in the communities, our institutional egos, we’re able to set them aside and work together for the good of all.”

- James Shea
Is there a culture of education in North Dakota?

Anderson: At the 2020 & Beyond, there were some statistics that were shown and they went 1990, 2000, 2007, 2010 and in all of that you saw increasing levels of educational attainment. I would say that, at least in the last couple of decades, it’s really improved a lot. North Dakota has got bragging rights when they’ve got over a 90 percent high school graduation and then 20 percent with at least bachelor’s degree and, I think it’s just 7 percent on the advanced graduate levels. It’s an exciting place and education is valued. It’s just not by everybody all the time and it’s sometimes narrow. It’s not broadening it out. The whole key is to provide people a choice on what they want to be when they grow up and how they want to continue to learn and develop. I think we have a very good system.

Nadolny: When I go to any city in the state and look for quality of life, I look at any of the university systems. It really is amazing the quality of life that the colleges and universities bring to the state of North Dakota. In many ways they’re the centers.

Skogen: It is so exciting to be here and see all of this going on, whether it is agricultural, manufacturing, the oil boom, whatever. We, as North Dakotans, have got to get out of the 1980 mentality that this is going to go away, we’re going to bust now, we’re all going to be back where we were before this started and don’t get excited about it. We need the leadership of the state and Governor Dalrymple gets it. We’re in a different time now. Everybody that’s in a leadership position needs to understand we’re in a different time and we need to take advantage of this for the future of the state. The issue of folks moving into the state, if we can do the quality-of-life issues that people aren’t just transitioning through our beloved state because there happens to be jobs here now, but they pull in and say, “I want to stay here.” The quality of life here, whether it’s healthcare, education, cultural exposure, diversification, whatever it might be, we can address that issue in the state. It’s going to take an investment. It’s great to be a native North Dakotan and say, “Look at this list, we’re number one here.” We’re used to being number 49, 48, 47. In most people’s mind we were a blank rectangle in the center of the nation but we’re not anymore. What we need is the leadership of North Dakota across the board to say, “We are in a different time” and then we need to invest in education. We need to invest in culture. We need to invest in quality of life. That’s what will keep people. There are more North Dakotans today than have ever lived in this state. The last time we peaked out was 1930. In the Great Depression people just moved out. Everybody went to California or Washington State, they moved out of here in droves and could never come back. We are now past that. We’re bigger than we were in the 1930’s and I’m excited about it.

Nadolny: When I was a senior, my dad asked me what major I was and I told him philosophy. He ripped open a newspaper and said, “I don’t see any philosophy majors for hire.” It made me realize that it’s not an either/or situation. It’s both work and it’s play and it’s art. We need to create education in the state of North Dakota as a cultural experience, something that one engages in throughout one’s lifetime. That is what makes a great state, when people understand education as their culture. I’m a firm believer in the completion agenda. Continue to complete; continue to advance, continue to see higher education as the center of a healthy community.

Badal: When you think about the diversity in higher ed., the one thing North Dakota needs to do is to communicate to the wider world that this is a state that is moving towards being number one in higher education, in opportunities in higher education. We’re looking at a lot of states. Public systems are crashing because of economic problems, overburdened by the numbers of students trying to get into too few classes. We’ve got many great institutions in this state. We could do more together as a state if all the privates and publics worked together to create that image for the state. We are moving up in the higher ed. arena and we are a force. That is what’s going to bring young people to North Dakota, more than anything else; more than oil, more than agriculture. This is an opportunity for the state to make the most of a tremendous resource it has. I don’t think the state’s doing that very well currently and it’s partly because we’re all doing our own individual thing versus all of the institutions working together. There’s something that could be gained if we worked more closely as a higher ed. community within the state of North Dakota. We need to talk from a comprehensive point of view. It would be good for the state.