

## **Public Accountability: The College of Charleston's Economic Impact on South Carolina** By Leo I. Higdon, Jr.

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For Congress, the pending issue of institutional accountability for federal spending on higher education is fairly new. For university presidents, however, accountability has been at the forefront for a long time. After all, under current federal legislation, the educational futures of six million college students are on the line. Over \$60 billion of federal financial aid is in jeopardy. How can we afford to be complacent?

But what does "institutional accountability" mean, and how does it tie in with our impact on the state's economy?

First of all, our primary goal as higher education leaders is to provide our students with the best possible preparation for their lives and careers. This preparation is the principle of public education; consequently it forms the foundation for the economic well-being of the state. In fulfilling this goal, we are affecting not only the future of our students, but the future of our state economy as well. Therefore, we should always be prepared to give a full and public accounting for how we manage our resources.

As South Carolina's oldest institution of higher education, the College of Charleston takes this responsibility very seriously. For us, the principles of public accountability and educational access are not theories. They are the driving force behind all that we do, and the results of these efforts can be seen in both the success of our graduates and in the economic impact our programs have on the state.

In turn, the quality of education we provide translates into very real economic figures. For example, the College of Charleston has an annual economic impact on the tri-county region of over \$.4 billion — the equivalent of roughly 9,000 jobs. In surveys, the majority of in-state students (and over 1/3 of our out-of-state students) indicate an intent to remain and work in South Carolina after they graduate. And though the College's undergraduate population is significantly smaller than the state's research universities, proportionately we have the highest number of science graduates in the state, and the third-highest number of graduates overall.

Yet these numbers serve only as economic indicators — they don't detail the specific actions we've taken to attain our primary goal, which is to successfully prepare our graduates for life and work in the 21st century. More than anything, it is this preparation that is fundamental to our state's economic future. In other words, the College's focus on the preparation of our graduates is in complete alignment with the state's interests. Specifically, we have:

- Increased the College's need-based financial aid budget. Recognition of the need for financial support is critical to providing educational access. Across the country, the percentage of lower-income students enrolled in higher education is shrinking. If we are to reverse this trend, we must focus on awarding more students with the funding they need, and ensure that all qualified in-state students can attend the College of Charleston.
- Developed services and programs that support the transition into postsecondary education. This transition applies to incoming freshmen, transfers from technical schools or 2-year colleges, part-time students, special-needs students, and adults returning to complete their education. These services have increased access for nontraditional students and have resulted in markedly higher retention and graduation rates at the College.
- Enhanced programs for continuing education. For example, the Lowcountry Graduate Center, formed in 2001 by the College of Charleston, the Citadel, and MUSC, was specifically developed to expand the skill sets and career opportunities for adult learners. Simultaneously it serves as a stimulus for growth by attracting new businesses to the area, and helps established companies recruit and retain top employees.
- Developed partnerships with other schools, universities, and businesses. Programs developed through these partnerships have a significant educational and economic impact on the state. For example, the College is working on a Genomics program with MUSC to develop new methods, tools, and techniques to enhance the state's shrimp and oyster industries, and we are collaborating with The Citadel on a graduate program in Computer Science.
- Implemented innovative programs that will further stimulate local educational attainment and business growth. Our School of Education partners with local schools to assist students for college-level admissions and curricula, and our School of Business and Economics is expanding its program in small business development.

These programs greatly enhance our basic educational goal of preparing our graduates for the future. By the time our students graduate, we expect them to think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, and take an ethical approach to everything they do. In short, we want them to make a difference. We are educating students for the workforce of the future, preparing undergraduates with a sound liberal arts and sciences education that will serve as a strong foundation in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. But in doing so, it's important to remember that we are providing for the future of South Carolina the remainder of the year, in all of our schools, and in all of our communities.

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**Lee Higdon wrote this article while president of the College of Charleston from 2001-2006.**