

UNI students, governor find common ground on funding



Tiffany Rushing, WATERLOO COURIER

Gov. Terry Branstad, along with the Mary Herring, the University of Northern Iowa associate dean for the College of Education, look over some materials during the governor's visit Friday to the Schindler Education Center on the UNI campus in Cedar Falls.

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CEDAR FALLS, Iowa — University of Northern Iowa students found common ground Friday with Gov. Terry Branstad on the need to foster the next generation on college campuses.

Though the group, most of them juniors and seniors, is not likely to be on the UNI campus when the suggested improvements go into effect, students nonetheless engaged Branstad for about 30 minutes on ways the state can partner with the university for the betterment of Iowa.

Blake Findley, a UNI senior and the student body vice president, led off a question-and-answer session with Branstad by jumping right into the question of funding equity for the Cedar Falls-based university.

“The present formula really discriminates against UNI because most of your students are from Iowa. You don’t get the higher out-of-state tuition the other universities get,” Branstad said. “We do appreciate the fact that UNI does a really great job of educating Iowa students and that a very high percentage of your graduates ... stay in the state of Iowa.”

About 92 percent of UNI students are from Iowa.

Findley said the student government voted to oppose a proposed tuition freeze if the college does not get additional funding from the state.

Branstad said he included \$4 million in the current fiscal year, another \$4 million in the budget that is currently being debated and expects to have a new funding formula in place by the following year.

He said the criteria in the new funding formula — which will be proposed by the Iowa Board of Regents — should include a focus on helping Iowa students successfully graduate from Iowa universities.

Branstad suggested the new funding model also should focus on the enrollment of Iowa students since the state universities are funded by Iowa taxpayers. And he said it should also look at graduation rates.

Findley expressed some concern about an emphasis on graduation rates.

“Do you think there would be a way to make sure UNI doesn’t get disproportionately affected by that? Because we have a higher percentage of first-generation college students, and as a comprehensive university, our mission is a little bit different than Iowa and Iowa State,” he said.

“I’m a little concerned that if that happens, then UNI won’t get as much funding as we need,” he added.

Branstad said the graduation rate would be just one factor. More weight would likely be put on whether the students are from Iowa.

After the meeting, Branstad acknowledged that other public universities likely would push back if changes were made to the funding formula. But he reiterated his concern that the current formula has been unfair to UNI.

He also said it would not be feasible to continue the tuition freeze long-term. This will be the second year for the freeze if legislators accept his proposal.

But Branstad said he would not support double-digit percentage increases to state universities’ tuition.

He also encouraged students to meet with the Board of Regents when it is on campus Monday afternoon to discuss potential efficiencies that could be found at the public universities.

Corey Cooling, a senior majoring in physics and philosophy, also encouraged the governor to foster alternative energies on campus. On a windy Friday morning, Cooling talked about the efforts to generate energy from turbines on campus.

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