

RENEWING ILLINOIS: AMBITIOUS DREAMS AND PRACTICAL STEPS TO REVIVE THE PRAIRIE STATE

I. Renewing Illinois Summit Background

The Paul Simon Public Policy Institute recently hosted the inaugural “Renewing Illinois Summit: Ambitious Dreams and Practical Steps to Revive the Prairie State” on March 28th and 29th, which convened Illinois university students in Carbondale to develop a strategy to revive and rebuild our state. It is often said that people vote with their feet—an all-too-serious reality in Illinois. With the troubling migration trends out of the state, two fundamental questions must be asked and urgently answered: What will make Illinois prosper once again? What will convince young people to stay in Illinois? To address these issues, the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute turned to the future leaders of the state.

About forty students and professors participated in the summit. The participants, from nine different Illinois universities—Eastern Illinois University, Illinois State University, Illinois Wesleyan University, McKendree University, Northern Illinois University, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, University of Chicago, Western Illinois University, and Wheaton College—reflected many major divides in Illinois: geographic and political differences between northern Illinois and downstate communities, tensions between rural and urban communities, variance in socioeconomic upbringings, and diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. The students came from all corners of Illinois.

The Institute was eager convene these students and hear their views. While they certainly represented a diverse sample of Illinoisans, the students came together to consider ideas to renew and rebuild Illinois. The Summit stimulated vigorous discussion and generated constructive proposals to revitalize our state.

The participants heard several keynote addresses and spent much of their time in small group sessions discussing the state’s challenges and considering the best way forward.

II. Findings

Illinois has an impressive history and the potential for a remarkable future. The participants noted with hopefulness this potential for prosperity with the understanding that there is a long road ahead to achieving excellence in Illinois. The state’s policymakers and general public must step up their games to create the conditions to retain current residents and attract new ones.

Students in Illinois want the state to solve long-festering problems and build a strong foundation for the future. They are weary of temporizing, evasions, partial solutions, Band-Aids, and flimsy half-fixes. They understand that such progress will take major sacrifices, and they are willing to accept the challenge.

They see great potential here, but are concerned we have fallen into bad habits and have failed to invest for the future—their future. Illinois needs a fresh start, and then we need to tell our story in a more compelling way.

More specifically:

Illinois State Budget

A generation of can-kicking and evasions that has led to a large and seemingly permanent structural budget deficit must end. Illinois policymakers need to decisively determine what level of services is needed and create the reforms necessary to support those services. State policymakers should study the example of other states that rebuilt their fiscal positions, such as California, which swung from a nearly \$30 billion annual deficit to a nearly \$15 billion surplus in less than a decade. Additional revenues are necessary in Illinois.

The participants feel that, as the generation with the greatest number of tax-paying years ahead of them, their support for broadening the tax base and reforming the tax structure should be carefully considered by state policymakers. The participants generally support Governor Pritzker's graduated income tax plan, plastic bag tax, and others revenue proposals, but argue that, over time, such a tax base should be expanded to luxury services, political activity contributions, and environmentally-detrimental practices.

A strong, forward-looking bipartisan budget agreement with higher education, social services, and the associated revenue increases as top priorities would be an excellent place to start. This would demonstrate a commitment to Illinois' future and enhance our reputation nationwide. If such reforms are to be successful, far greater transparency is also required on budget and tax policy. An annual "Citizen's Guide to the Illinois State Budget" to accompany the release of the Governor's annual budget proposal was one suggestion for such efforts. Others suggested campaigns to highlight tangible examples of tax dollars at work.

Higher Education

Illinois once had one of the premier higher education systems in the country, but this

system has fallen on hard times. The recent budget crisis deeply harmed the university system. Costs have risen and enrollments have plunged. Fundamental rethinking is necessary. Higher education is the bedrock of Illinois' future. The Illinois government needs to place higher education at the top of its priority list, not simply as one item on a long list of claimants seeking funding. Without strong-performing institutions, university hopefuls and successful college graduates will take their success elsewhere.

The participants highlighted the importance of stabilizing and then increasing funding for Illinois higher education. Imperative to this process is robust support for the Monetary Assistance Program (MAP) for low-income students.

The participants indicated that budgetary commitments are not the sole place for improvement in Illinois higher education. The state must enhance the attractiveness of a public higher education in Illinois. Unconventional loan forgiveness programs for in- and out-of-state students who decide to reside in Illinois, a centralized university governing and marketing body, a standardized transfer process between community colleges and state universities, re-imagining uses of empty university residence halls, and a greater emphasis on technical and vocational education are issues that demand consideration.

The Summit participants determined that an independent, publicly-funded body should be established to assess the vital, yet currently ineffective, relationship between high schools, community colleges/vocational education centers, and universities. This body should address the unrealized potential of the educational network in Illinois and study opportunities for greater statewide collaboration to make our educational system more attractive.

Political Culture

Illinois has been the home to iconic political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and John Peter Altgeld, but our political culture has corroded and our reputation has become tarnished. The damage to our reputation has negatively impacted our business prospects and attractiveness as a destination for people across the country. Investors are understandably reluctant to spend their time, energy, and money in a state known for political corruption and economic instability.

We need stronger, more forward-looking leaders and more responsible citizens who will reward courageous policymakers and rebuke short-sighted and selfish ones. We, as a state, must show the rest of the country that we are committed to progress and political revival. The participants discussed this issue at length.

The participants believe that greater civic engagement is a responsibility of the general public and can be encouraged through statewide reforms. Enhanced civic education in Illinois high schools was one area of consensus. It was apparent that, as recent high school graduates and civically engaged individuals, the participants felt that their civic education courses were not sufficient. They suggested a more comprehensive, realistic, and progressive system of civic education that starts in the first year of high school and becomes more nuanced throughout the high school years.

Similarly, the participants believe that the non-partisan drawing of legislative districts is imperative, especially on the eve of the 2020 census. This, in conjunction with the active widening of access to voting, the strengthened prosecution of white collar political crime, and reformed statewide electoral processes could sufficiently indicate Illinois' commitment to a positive political culture. The students also expressed the desire for the implementation of a strengthened, publicized, and effective ethical code to encourage accountability.

III. Conclusion

The Summit's participants realize that far-reaching change cannot occur immediately, but reforms and renewal must start now. They demonstrated the willingness and enthusiasm necessary to take on these challenges. We encourage you to thoughtfully consider the ideas and concerns presented by our Summit participants. We are convinced that you are committed to "Renewing Illinois," and, therefore, urge you to consider the advice of college students who are invested in Illinois' future and have great hope for its potential.