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Writing about central Illinois history and culture, and the prepresidential rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln

JB Pritzker
Office of the Governor
207 State House
Springfield, IL 62706

April 4, 2022

Dear Governor Pritzker:

You undoubtedly know about the closing of Lincoln College at Lincoln, Illinois—the first Lincoln namesake college—ground broken for its University Hall on Abraham Lincoln’s last living birthday—in the first Lincoln namesake town, the seat of Logan County. This closing is a catastrophic loss to the economy and culture of the town, Logan County, and all of central Illinois. It is also a loss to Illinois higher education and to the heritage of the Land of Lincoln. As a native Lincolnite with an abiding interest in the quality of Illinois’s education, I write with a request for you to commission a blue ribbon panel to study the feasibility of the State of Illinois acquiring Lincoln College and reinventing it to play an innovative, vital role in strengthening Illinois’s economy and culture, and to serve as a model for American higher education to advance public affairs missions. I make this request because only you have the authority to enact it, but this is a public letter, which I will make available via social media. This letter is short because its purpose is simple, the need urgent.

A reinvented Lincoln College could have a mission dedicated to increasing our knowledge of what does and does not work in the business, industry, and professions of small to mid-sized communities in Illinois and the nation. An appropriate, two-year curriculum and instruction would involve students in applied theory and field study of the businesses, industries, and professions in central Illinois. Lincoln is a representative American small community, central to and within easy driving distance of several mid-sized cities besides the state capital, specifically Peoria, Bloomington/Normal, and Decatur. Students engaged in that study would come to know and share information about relevant problems and solutions, and would discover career preferences and opportunities for themselves and other students. The associate degrees (AA or AS) students would earn at a reinvented Lincoln College would prepare them to transfer to four-year institutions, including those in the mid-sized communities identified above. Illinois has a clear need for this kind of innovation in higher education.

A blue ribbon panel could bring state legislators together with administrators and faculty of Illinois colleges and universities. This panel could consider the University of Illinois System taking over Lincoln College as it did in 1995 to revitalize Sangamon State University, then renamed and now the Illinois flagship public affairs university. In 1862 at a time of national crisis, Lincoln wrote, “The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.” His words are not now inappropriate for Lincoln College, its acclaimed Lincoln Heritage Museum, and the state that is the Land of Lincoln. I know the value of innovative education because I am the product of an experimental, visionary doctoral program in English studies at Illinois State University begun in the late 1970s.

Respectfully,

D. Leigh Henson

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