Dear Alumni and Friends:

As alumni and friends of Birmingham-Southern College, I write to solicit your assistance for Governor Bob Riley’s tax and accountability proposal, which passed the Alabama Legislature in early June. As you may know, passage of this proposal on September 9, 2003, by the people of Alabama would also include support for a college merit scholarship program. The plan passed by the Legislature in June is not truly statewide because it applies only to students attending public colleges and universities. Similar scholarship programs in Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and South Carolina, among other states, all include students attending private institutions as part of these statewide scholarship programs.

We need your help in persuading the Governor and the Alabama State Legislature to change the scholarship program to include students who attend the private colleges of Alabama and to fund the Alabama Student Grant Program (ASGP) at the legislated maximum of $1,200. Many other states, such as South Carolina and Georgia, have both a merit scholarship program and a tuition equalization grant for students attending private institutions. Governor Riley has agreed to put the issue of including private college students on “the call” for a special legislative session, which will convene immediately after the September vote, if it passes. Additionally, both the Alabama-West Florida and North Alabama Conferences of The United Methodist Church unanimously passed resolutions in early June supporting the inclusion of students attending private institutions in the scholarship program. A phone call, letter, or e-mail from you to the Governor and your legislators will go a long way toward getting equal treatment for our students. (Please see telephone and e-mail addresses at the end of this letter.)

Why should private college students be included? There are many reasons. Their parents, whose average income is roughly equal to that of public institutions’ students’ parents, pay the same taxes everyone else does. Those taxes help keep tuition low at public institutions and would help fund the new scholarship program. Private colleges are providing a substantial public service in educating students at very little expense to the State, which actually saves Alabama a considerable amount of money. The scholarships would go to students, not the institution, so why should a student’s choice be limited to only State schools? Private colleges, whose students complete degrees at a higher percentage and in less time than public college students, are making a significant contribution to the State’s delivery of higher education at little cost to the State. Private institutions, their graduates, and their employees add greatly to Alabama’s economic growth. These contributions are far greater than one might expect from institutions that enroll 10 percent of students in four-year colleges and universities in Alabama.

Most important, including students who choose private colleges is simply good public policy. It encourages choice, which is one foundation of a strong statewide system of higher education. It decreases the cost to the State. In the Governor’s proposal, every scholarship student who attends a public institution would receive not only full tuition but a State subsidy of approximately $4,500 per student that keeps public tuition low, for a total of almost $10,000 a year. If that same student attended a private college and received the average tuition at four-year public institutions, the cost to the State would be half of that or less. It does not make sense to set up a scholarship program that could draw students away from private colleges, which graduate thousands of future wage-earners and taxpayers every year at a relatively low cost to the State.

The easiest way to contact your legislators is to go to the Alabama Legislature website at www.legislature.state.al.us. The opening page has a link to a “ZIP Code Lookup,” which will lead you to the name and contact information for your Senator and Representative. If you don’t have web access, call the Senate information line at 334-242-7800 and the House information line at 334-242-7600. The Governor’s address is: The Honorable Bob Riley, Governor, State of Alabama, State Capitol, 600 Dexter Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36130. Lieutenant Governor Lucy Baxley’s address is: The Honorable Lucy Baxley, Lieutenant Governor, State of Alabama, 11 South Union Street, Suite 725, Montgomery, AL 36130. Speaker of the House Seth Hammett’s address is The Honorable Seth Hammett, Speaker of the House, State of Alabama, Room 519-A, 11 South Union Street, Montgomery, AL 36130.

Please consider adapting the information in this article and writing a short letter or e-mail to let our state leaders know that private college students are not being treated fairly under the proposed scholarship plan. Even if you do not live in Alabama, if you would have benefited from such a program as an undergraduate or have relatives who might benefit, please consider writing and expressing your thoughts.

It goes without saying that if the plan goes through without private college students being included, all private colleges in the state, including Birmingham-Southern College, will suffer greatly. Several years of a weak economy and a poor stock market have greatly reduced endowment income.

Please write your legislators now and send a copy of your letters or e-mails to me, President Neal Berte, 900 Arkadelphia Road, Box 549002, Birmingham, AL 35254, or nberte@bsc.edu, so that we can keep a record of contacts made. YOUR EFFORTS WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE. Thank you for all that you do and for your consideration of this request.

NEAL R. BERTE
PRESIDENT