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Our University: Vision and Dollars

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Our University: Vision and Dollars

If you pay any attention to anything regarding higher education, things are getting tough. No news here. They have been since nearly the turn of this century when the state stopped increasing support of higher education.

Oh, there are increases for pork laden programs, economic development activities and special legislative activities and initiatives, but general increases that nurture faculty quality and student excellence are non-existent, and anyone thinking that will change has his or her head in the sand.

Meanwhile, tuition, fees, and the costs of auxiliary services for all university support, food, housing, athletics, and other aspects of higher education are increasing.

The answer to the problem is gritty and simple.

Get a vision, a plan, which looks out into the future for 15 or 20 years, and recognizes that states are withdrawing taxpayer support for higher education and shifting it to those who actually gain the greatest direct benefit: the students who earn degrees. That is why tuition and fees are escalating and student grant and loan support will increase, but direct state support to universities will decrease.

Public resources for higher education will play a diminishing role in the funding picture. In the last five decades the state share of the budget decreased from 70% of our budget to around 30%. Some of the best public universities post budgets with less than 10% from state coffers. The trend will not reverse itself. It is a cultural shift that university leaders must accept, even welcome, as it will separate the grain from the chaff.

A form of voucherism or state supported Darwinism and earned excellence will inexorably follow.

One aspect of any vision for higher education calls for universities to tighten their belts. That is why Stanley Ikenberry, Interim President of the University of Illinois is implementing furloughs.

It is one aspect of a long range view. Who knows, he may even have a plan.

The idea that a furlough is only a short term solution and presents little long term relief has some truth in it. But such a posture might, as in the case of the University of Illinois, create a refreshed cultural view of the university both internally and externally. This could be powerful.

The university has a real job to do. The future of the state and the nation depends on it being well done. Trim the sails and sharpen the target. Here lie

the seedlings of a plan and vision. This view paints the university as a free-standing agency for the public good that recognizes decreasing state support and increasing private support. Private giving, research, grants, fees and other exchanges of value that do not require hat-in-hand tit-for-tat at a politically broken, personality-driven, state house.

Ikenberry's furloughs provide \$17 million from a \$436 million backlog at the flagship.

Peanuts they say.

Some argue this is a cash flow problem and not a budget problem, and assume when the dam breaks and the money flows that the problem is solved.

This is short-sighted and naïve.

Higher education in Illinois and the nation will survive by thinking ahead, tightening its belt and becoming more entrepreneurial than ever before.

Vision and planning. Not simply reacting.

A university is a public good, but a unique one that requires leadership and vision that look long-term; and really good ones will never again be seen as state agencies, job banks, or patronage machines.

When a university becomes only a state agency it will fail in achieving its mission. It must be more than that. It must demonstrate value by its ability to attract resources.

Our University must provide life changing opportunity to students and the greater community...anything less is abject neglect. It requires vision in decades, and dollars from many sources, not terms of office and the public trough.