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Our University – Budget Challenges

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Our University – Budget Challenges

Universities all over the United States are wrestling with budget challenges unequaled since the early eighties. There is a tendency in times like these to say, ‘What can we do differently?’ or ‘How can we stay afloat?’ Answers outside the response, “Focus on fundamental mission” are wrong, misguided, and short-sighted.

Never change mission as a response to a crisis. It is weakness, not strength. Change mission as a heartfelt response to sense of purpose, not an empty checkbook. One response is leadership, the other laziness. Rather, focus every ounce of determination and commitment of the institution on primary mission.

Universities and other post-secondary educational institutions should be shedding activities that do not support primary mission, not holding on to them as misguided public service. The pinnacle of public service is excellence. That will create more jobs, and provide a greater return-on-investment than anything else a research university can do.

In tough economies the value of devotion to mission is elevated, not diminished.

Reducing standards to attract students and pay bills should never be an option for a national research university. Baccalaureate degrees at community colleges depart from their real purpose and are extraneous. Jobs and local issues should prevail, not expansion of mission into areas outside the interests of taxpayers who pay the freight through tax levies. Likewise, universities that commit unnecessary resources to college preparatory work and remediation are wading into the waters of the community colleges.

The correct path is tenacious focus.

In states with the greatest fiscal challenges, this is not a revelation. A recent Pew study finds California, Rhode Island, Michigan, Oregon, Nevada, Florida, New Jersey, Illinois and Wisconsin are a fiscal mess of misappropriation, mismanagement and misplaced priorities. Even the Terminator knows it.

The horse has been out of the barn for a long time. Many universities have been a decade without state budgetary increases. Resources to respond to rising labor and materials costs have been born by higher tuition and fees, although everyone rails against rising costs in higher education.

Alert universities have initiated private fundraising efforts and research support to soften the blow of budget reductions.

We should be looking ahead, not waiting until the crisis demands what cannot be given. Following the lead of Wall Street instead of Main Street defies logic,

common sense, and prudence. It is only astute politically and, as we see from current events, that spurious logic prevails only for a season. Do not give what you do not have. Make sure your priorities are squarely on target and pursue mission with dogged perseverance.

For those post-secondary institutions that stay true to purpose, there will be light at the end of the tunnel and it will not be from an oncoming train.

Focus is a challenging task in the best of times for the drift in mission as institutions scramble to be all things to all people.

Focus is an impossible task for organizations that lack vision, leadership insight and a thoughtful, business-like exercise of responsibility.

This is a serious commitment and it is not for the faint at heart. It takes a passion for the long haul and big ideas in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. Oliver Wendell Holmes accounted for it this way, "*The greatest thing in the world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving*".