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Our University: Retention and Graduation

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Our University: Retention and Graduation

The ultimate way to increase the retention rate - the percentage of students who return to study after the first year - is to increase admission standards. Similarly, to increase the six-year graduation rates - the national effectiveness measure for students completing baccalaureate degrees - increase admission standards. The most heartless thing to do to is to accept students who are not ready. The most wasteful thing a university can do is take on students who will be unsuccessful in completing their studies. Lost opportunity costs accrue to both student and institution.

John Lombardi, Chancellor of the LSU System, told the New Orleans Times Picayune recently that low admission standards are "the primary waste in the Louisiana higher education system", and Louisiana does not have the market cornered on sub 50% retention and graduation rates. Some institutions in other states are near single digits on both counts.

Public universities are accepting greater numbers of unqualified students than ever before. Budgets are shrinking and we try to serve more who can do less.

It would be easy to be critical of the high schools. I will not. And there would be a long list of reasons: family life problems, poor curriculum, low teacher pay, unions that temper performance, lack of positive role models, and a plethora of other legitimate and serious factors, but ones over which the university has little or no control.

As Nancy Reagan said a few decades ago, regarding the drug temptations faced by so many adolescents, "Just say no!"

This is not the favored approach. Instead, we build scaffolding for students who come unprepared: There are tutors and help sessions, support groups and academic mentoring, but while each one of these approaches has merit in a time of shrinking resources and slipping performance, the scaffolding is not working. For motivated students, community colleges or post high school pre-university remediation can make a marked impact at a modest cost.

As long as universities interested in growing enrollment rather than quality are willing to accept unprepared students and the borrowed money they bring to help pay the bills, the burden will be carried by taxpayers and universities as quality is eroded over the struggle to accommodate under-qualified applicants, with the knowledge that a disproportionate number of students will fail. Nobody wins.

The automobile industry was lazy with quality for decades. We are now paying for it as GM's world predominance in motor vehicle design and production of the fifties is now mere exhaust. The housing industry tried the everybody-is-qualified formula in the late nineties and now, in the first decade of the 21st century, the

chickens have come home to roost, and our once robust approach to home ownership is flattening out, the foundation crushed by an industry over-correcting for self-inflicted wounds.

Higher education may go the same way in the future. American higher education has rightfully held great pride in the access/excellence/innovation formula that was, and should continue to be, the envy of the world.

Leadership could evaporate because we cannot muster the strength to “Just say no!”

This is not about survival but excellence. It is about a national treasure being frittered away because we are trying desperately to allow anyone, even those apathetic, uncommitted, or unable to perform at a satisfactory level, in the gate.

These are harsh words, but the facts remain unchanged. As our standards for admission sink, so does quality and the world-leading tradition of the greatest American enterprise.

Our nation and our universities need and deserve our unfettered best.