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Our University – Budget Cuts

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Our University – Budget Cuts

Universities across the nation are facing some of the toughest times imaginable.

In Atlanta, Georgia Tech is talking about cutting research according to Jim Kirk, the budget director. Cut research at Georgia Tech? The place may be losing its way. Not a good idea. Research should be the last thing cut at Georgia Tech, not the first.

At the California State University System, they are talking about reducing enrollment to meet an unprecedented budget reduction of over one half billion dollars. Jeri Echeverria, executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer, said there may not be any new admissions in the winter quarter to address the scarcity of resources. Not a good idea. Cut programs not vital; grow others where quality, demand and need are consistently strong.

The University of Arizona President Robert Shelton understands. He said that a \$100 million campus reduction "... necessitates closing of actual units, making surgical decisions rather than across-the-board decisions." An excellent idea. Make intelligent decisions about what is central to the university and what is not.

Exacerbating this challenge is the idea that many cuts made now will not bear fruit in the immediate future. For example if President Shelton cuts programs, the savings from reductions may take a few years to fully realize. Program completion for currently enrolled students, reducing workforce in an equitable manner, closing doors that used to be open, takes time but there is no better time than right now to make hard decisions about university mission and purpose.

Focus in good times and bad, and quality will rise.

Leadership is being tested nationwide, and there should be a careful, rational, and intellectually deliberate form of decision making that asks difficult questions about every program on campus. Actions need to be consistent with the stated mission of the university. Mission is not icing on the cake during tough times, it is the bone structure of the organization.

Goring every ox is not mission-responsive leadership.

The leadership required in making differential cuts and identifying with dispatch changes that could have a long-term positive impact on the university is treacherous for the difficult personnel decisions that inevitably follow. Impossible in some cases as union contracts, given away by management masquerading as leadership, don't provide for reductions in workforce without breaking the law.

Allowing degradation of quality across-the-board will hurt the very thing that needs protection for economic strength: academic excellence, desirability,

distinctiveness, national and international market share. These breed economic vitality.

The university must purposefully adapt to its environment, like any organism.

Leadership cannot throw its hands in the air, or wring them in real or feigned concern in response to the challenges, but must act decisively to prune vines deemed unproductive.

A thankless task, but the very one for which leadership's high salaries and generous packages of benefits are intended to compensate.

Someone once asked me about my job as university leader and what I thought of it. I suggested that nine days out of ten it was easy, for the work was rewarding and enjoyable, I was well paid, and had the very special opportunity of getting things done to advance the institution for which I worked, and for students.

That other day though, that one in ten was agony. When a difficult set of decisions about personnel, contracts, or other matters was to be made, it nearly overpowered the other nine days of sheer joy. But, that's the equation.

University leadership must make tough decisions knowing that many within and outside the university will face difficulty, may lose jobs but, in the end, the university will be a stronger and more powerful public enterprise.

That is leadership in tough times.