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Our University – The Blame Game

In any organization, when times are tough, there is a natural tendency for people to find someone, or something, to blame. I used to work with a fellow who taught juniors in the program. He always complained about the quality of the work of his students, and claimed that the students were not prepared for what he was asking them to do.

He blamed the faculty who taught in the freshman and sophomore years as well as the students themselves.

There is an old story about a high school teacher who blamed a student's poor performance on the junior high school teachers, who blamed it on the grade school teachers, who blamed it on the boy's parents. The principal went to talk to the mother. She blamed the father. When the principal visited the father he claimed he was not sure the boy was even his son, so it couldn't be his fault.

Blame, like water, is welded to the first law of plumbing.

And it goes the other way. The professor may blame his department chair for a lack of support to be able to accomplish desired ends. The department chair may blame the dean, the dean the provost, the provost the president, the president, if she is smart, skips the board and goes straight to the state, the state blames the party for a lack of bipartisanship, or the federal government, and they in turn blame circumstances, previous administrations and the world economy.

Blame, like dross and slag, rises to the top.

Current events make it easy for universities to blame the states that are supposed to support them. The University leaders ask, "Why do you forsake us?" And it is true; states are not supporting universities the way that they used to.

Leadership cannot necessarily change circumstances but can change an organization in response to them.

This is not to suggest that parents are not responsible for their children's education, or that faculty are not correct in identifying a lack of support from above as problematic. But, circumstances are circumstances and the positive response to any and all will make the institution stronger and better, no matter how dire they appear.

Leadership deals with a challenging environment at two levels.

First, leadership must take immediate action to deal with the difficulty faced; as serious problems don't disappear over time, they fester and worsen. Secondly,

and of greater importance, leadership must deal with the long term implication of the current crisis with a responsive plan for the future. For example, if the university is too dependent on state funding, find alternatives.

The public bucket is completely empty in a dozen states and, even more troubling, without a bottom in nearly again that many. Hank Williams Jr. memorialized the problem, *"My buckets got a hole in it, and I can't buy no beer"*

Blame the old pots and pails or find some new ones: leadership chooses.

Correct choices will make things happen and the university will be master of its own fate, no matter how challenging the times are. Or, the university will be a victim of circumstance. It is like no other state agency or public entity; its mission and purpose are absolutely unique.

Can you imagine a warden writing to ex-convicts and asking them to send money to help build a new library, or a gym? Or, can you expect elected officials to applaud an organization with an athletics coach that makes 10 or 20 times the annual salary of a faculty member or an elected official.

One of the jobs of our university should be to find, in abundance and adversity, opportunity for excellence through deliberate action in response to mission.