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Our University – Summertime

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Our University – Summertime

Not one stone will remain unturned in a nationwide effort to reduce operating costs, tuition and fees over the next few years for all public and private universities. American ingenuity coupled with a deep, abiding pragmatism suggests this crisis of cost will have an economizing impact on universities.

Institutions that provide excellence with high efficiency will serve most best.

Whatever your perspective, and acknowledging the reprehensible crassness of the sentiment given the number of people adversely affected by the present economy, Rahm Emmanuel's insensitive characterization is real, *"It is a shame to waste a good crisis."* Knute Rockne voiced the same idea uncoupled from glib political expediency, *"When the going gets tough, the tough get going."* However, the grandfather of the idea is Socrates when in Book Two of Plato's Republic, he muses that *"...necessity, who is the mother of our invention."*

I won't argue university mission here, or the value of the university to a free society or a working democracy, or the importance of excellent professors and students in achieving mission and supporting the forward progress of our nation. You can go to the website <http://walterwendler.wordpress.com/> and read reflections on these concepts.

Operational horse sense is the target of this thought.

Can you imagine an organization with a world changing mission essentially shutting down for three months a year in the 21st century, so that the students can help on the family farm, or more contemporarily, take vacations? I know, many students work during the summer to pay for college. They still could.

This month, the University of California is continuing to review the idea of three-year bachelor degrees. A dozen other university systems are also considering changes to the calendar. Some institutions already offer "microwave" matriculations.

Naysayers suggest these changes are not going to produce enough impact to solve the current crisis. Surely this is true, but growth and adaptation to current circumstances will make a university more able to change in response to as yet unknown future conditions. Positive adaptability is a learned trait in any enterprise.

Universities must change to more efficiently serve students, and simultaneously seek higher levels of quality. Excellence and efficiency are not mutually exclusive constructs.

A number of years ago, I participated in a group of faculty that looked at treating the summer as a full third semester to reduce time to graduation. There are many benefits to operating continuously, and some very positive possibilities. For example, the efficiency of cooling, lighting, and cleaning buildings in the summer for a greater number of faculty and students is clear.

More intriguing issues exist. The possibility of a professor teaching a full load of courses in the summer and taking a reflective respite in the fall or spring semester as a trade-off provides longer periods for focused research and scholarly work, and may help with hectic family life, working partners, and child care arrangements.

With a fuller palette of courses in the summertime students could make real progress towards their degrees, possibly finish in less than four years and get into the workforce or graduate school sooner. Many professors could benefit simultaneously.

Why not?

The impetus for our faculty group stalled amid concerns about collective bargaining issues, state law, and the momentous change in point-of-view that such a proposal would require.

Simple economics teaches us the lesson that nearly anything you buy is cheaper today than it will be tomorrow. A student who finishes early saves money on that precept alone.

Bob Dylan, not a conspicuous authority on higher education and its shifting environment, understood this notion when he twanged out the words mimicking fingernails on a blackboard, *"For you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, for the times, they are a changin'"*.