

5-27-2010

Our University – Growth and Change

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University – Growth and Change" (2010). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 55.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/55

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Our University – Growth and Change

People don't like the concept of downsizing. A few years ago management experts were talking about "right-sizing" as an alternative concept. Organizations always serve best when they serve most efficiently.

One way to create efficiency is to make sure that the workforce has the appropriate characteristics for the job at hand.

In his classic text, *On Growth and Form*, D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson postulated that, *"An organism is so complex a thing, and growth so complex a phenomenon, that for growth to be so uniform and constant in all the parts as to keep the whole shape unchanged would indeed be an unlikely and an unusual circumstance. Rates vary, proportions change, and the whole configuration alters accordingly."*

Universities? Nothing can be held constant in the face of change.

For example if, over a decade, bachelors' degree production drops 7%, student credit hours taught decrease 10%, enrollment declines 9%, state funding increases 100%, employee headcount rises 14%, and tuition and fees escalate over 250% changes need to occur to keep the organism healthy. Ignoring the changes, wishing they would go away, or pursuing superficial amelioration strategies won't work.

What was is not what is, or what will be.

Normally growth in student population increases resources through economy of scale. Leadership not focused on university mission might allow a quality shortfall leading to a drop-off in demand and a relentless downward cycle of escalated costs and sinking quality.

This is a painful but crisp, clear picture for a number of universities and university communities in our nation.

There are approximately 400 college towns in American including 10 in Illinois that fit the general definition of high enrollment to general population ratios and other factors related to cost of living, transience in population, educational attainment, alternative life styles, and a host of other readily recognizable characteristics.

In every case these 400 college towns, and their proximate geographic/political regions, are impacted by every deep breath a university takes.

One way to align costs and benefits in attainment of the university mission is to limit or minimize the personnel costs, which constitute nearly 80% of all university expenditures. Reducing the number of employees is difficult in any organization,

public or private. So is outsourcing. These are especially complex actions in a government organization where the employees are the same citizens who vote for the leadership of a university.

The highest level leadership is either appointed directly by a board, or indirectly through approval by the board. The board is appointed by the governor, or in some states, elected by popular vote. Board members are protectors of the public trust in a multitude of dimensions, but most assuredly as fiduciaries of state resources for the benefit of the greater public good.

Misguided, naïve, or uninformed leadership may say, "Save jobs at all costs." Enlightened leadership says, "Pursue and attain excellence at all costs and jobs will be created. "

Environmental changes lead to structural changes, or failure. That is what mathematical biologist D'Arcy Thompson said and it applies to both petunias and universities.

The complexity of the quality equation increases when state civil service systems, multiplied by unions with employment and pension demands, attenuated by student desires, are in flux simultaneously.

At our university, and at every other, leadership is the only response to a changing organism in a changing environment. Yesterday's playbook will not work. Leadership must create value and focus on primary mission while increasing quality.

Any of these actions in isolation will not respond to Thompson's Law.

Sometimes short-term pain bears long-term benefit, and that is ultimately the public good for campus and community in all college towns.