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Our University - Priorities and Product

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Our University - Priorities and Product

Universities must compete for students through excellence and quality. There is no substitute for competition in creating excellence, and it should be the highest priority for any institution of higher education.

Governments cannot make universities by enactments of laws: Nor corporations by erections of edifices: The church cannot create them under the authority of heaven: The flattering eulogies of orators cannot adorn them with learning: Newspapers cannot puff them into being. Learned men-scholars- these are the only workmen who can build up universities. Provide charters and endowments- the necessary protection and capital - provide books and apparatus- the necessary tools: Then seek out sufficient scholars, and leave them to their work, as the intellectual engineers who alone are competent to do it.

Henry P. Tappan (1805-1881) President, University of Michigan

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In a Saint Patrick's Day story posted on the website *InsideHigherEd.com,* the virtues of Los Rios Community College and the symbiotic relationship between labor and management built on interest-based bargaining are touted. *In It Together in California* author Dan Berrett suggests that faculty, staff and administration work together to *"split revenue*." Interest-based bargaining, a nice concept in the private sector, is heralded as the peace-creating, peace-saving process.

Simple questions about what the product of Los Rios Community College is are not addressed. Are students products? Are students customers? Is peace a product? If a product becomes weak are leadership and excellence sustainable? Students are neither products nor customers, and likewise, universities are neither factories nor social service agencies.

At GM, if the Chevy can't make it to the levy – you remember the Chevrolet that Dinah Shore saw the USA in - labor and management should be concerned as product is central in the marketplace. If confusion reigns and product is seen as something other than cars or trucks - say the social capital of GM - its contribution to the nation falters. Bottom line and stock prices sink while product becomes second rate. Not profound or pretty.

Evidently, Los Rios Community College District has figured out a way around the idea that someone has to look after quality. Somebody has to sort out the good, the bad, and the ugly. When everyone is concerned about saving jobs and putting quality *"In the Back Seat of My Car"*, the ballad in which Paul McCartney said *"Oh-oh, we believe that we can't be wrong",* products and/or customers, suffer.

We risk losing touch with what we do, and why we do it.

Los Rios redefined the game - saving jobs seems to be *"Job One".* That was Ford's claim, *"Quality is Job One"* when it was not *Job One*, and everyone knew it. You cannot speak nor will quality into existence. It is worked into being. That is what Tappan recognized when he said faculty are the, "… *intellectual engineers who alone are*

competent to do it." If an educational institution measures success on something other than the performance and abilities of students, it may substitute inferior alternatives for excellence as a measure of worth. Such substitutions undermine the enterprise. Quickly.

The process at Los Rios has faculty, staff, and administration splitting up commitments from the state: They are, "…ladled out according to an agreed upon formula." This sounds good. The unions vote on how to do this and thereby increase trust and transparency. To be sure, there is value in this approach, but where are students in the equation? Who looks out for their best interests in transferring to senior institutions? Or in job placement at the completion of certificates or associate degrees? It may be in the mix, but it is not mentioned a single time in this piece. Taking it for granted is a car wreck.

Ryan Cox, associate vice chancellor of human resources at Los Rios, is quoted as saying, *"It makes us recognize the long-term interests of the institution as a whole."* Refuting this statement is impossible. It is too reasonable. I simply ask what long-term interests?

How can an educational institution be "whole" without a single mention of students?

My concern with the Los Rios approach is that the words excellence and quality, and more frighteningly, graduates, whether products or customers, are never uttered. Maybe these ideas can't be "ladled out" as easily as public funds among public employees and hence their absence.

Possibly, educational value is falling off in perceived importance and jobs and social capital are in the driver's seat. The people who produced the Zastava Koral - you know it as the Yugo - understood it because the market proclaimed it in high fidelity.