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Our Universities: It Ain't Gonna' Fly

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Our Universities: It Ain't Gonna' Fly

Universities need to change over time. Change comes from leadership, as organizations resist it by nature.

Interim Chancellor Robert Easter, who oversees the Urbana-Champaign campus, praised the program's "long and prestigious history as a leader in aviation education" but said ending it will save up to \$750,000 a year. He said enrollment has dropped more than 50 percent from 2002 to 2010.

Sophia Tareen, Associated Press

The University of Illinois (U of I) is making national news but not for work on regulation of the bio-fuels market central to the 21st economy, or for a review of the light emitting diode pioneered there 50 years ago, or studies of wage subsidies and terms of employment, or for better understanding social safety nets in reducing childhood obesity either.

Rather, they are closing its aviation program.

The aviation program, which has done a good job for the past six decades, is being closed. The reason given is that the enrollment has dropped more than 50% in 8 years. They are going to save \$750,000 dollars through the closure. These are dollars that, in theory, will be used to fund other programs that are a better fit with the university's mission.

From time to time, just as it is necessary to add new programs to meet student's and society's changing needs and desires, universities must eliminate programs that have outlived their natural life and no longer contribute adequately to meeting the university mission.

Universities are gardens that must be pruned as well as fertilized if they are to bear fruit.

A university must be run in a business-like fashion. Decisions about where and how to focus are the difficult work of university leadership. The chancellor of the University of Illinois, Robert Easter, indicated the reason for closing the program was the enrollment drop, but low enrollment isn't the appropriate benchmark. If it were, I could offer Mr. Easter a whole series of suggestions about new programs to add, based solely on customer demand.

Rather, if programs don't fit the university mission, they should be eliminated. All successful business leaders know that sustaining an enterprise requires a long term view that may be at odds with the current climate.

Leadership must decide which pieces fit, in concert with faculty and an articulated vision. Without a vision, no program should be eliminated or created. Greater enrollment is not a mission statement or cause, but an effect.

Committees cut babies in half. We need Solomons, not serfs.

No campus leader wakes up and thinks, "I don't want an aviation program anymore, I think I will cut this one out." Program elimination inevitably alienates some people and creates new opportunities for others, which leads to politicization of the process. Alumni of the program can feel devalued, faculty may be eliminated, and the sudden availability of resources may result in chaos among other programs hoping to annex space, equipment, and funds.

A political perspective leads a university to take the easiest next step, regardless of whether it leads toward a goal. The political question usually asked is, "What have you done for me lately?" frequently asked because of something from the weekly news cycle.

To counter this, a board must look at fiduciary interests, and assign to the campus leadership the job of setting a general direction. It then must watch, trust, and question, and determine what mix of programs to invest in to develop the greatest returns for their students and the state.

It can take six to seven years to accomplish this task alone.

At Southern Illinois University, aviation is more central to the university mission. Knowing this, the University of Illinois can direct its resources to ideas and initiatives that build on and benefit from its unique strengths; strengths that have resulted in such accomplishments as the first complete sequencing of the swine genome, or the development of the internet browser Mosaic(TM), which revolutionized the use of the World Wide Web.

The Fighting Illini can be proud of their alumni: 11 are Nobel laureates, 158 are Guggenheim Fellows, and another 17 have won Pulitzer Prizes. This boosts enrollment if that is important... assuredly, it is business-like.

Good leadership founded on participatory governance works, but not when it is hamstrung by considerations of enrollment figures or jobs as its primary purpose.

It's bad for business and that won't fly for long.