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# Our Universities: Wailing and Gnashing of Teeth

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## Our Universities: Wailing and Gnashing of Teeth

Well-meaning faculty members, university leaders, and groups of students and parents have always found that the most navigable and widely paved path to address increasing costs leads straight to the state house. That mindlessness “hair-of-the-dog” economic thinking is antiquated. And, that dog won’t hunt.

Our collective pockets are turned inside out. University leadership must innovate and must be left free to do so. Simplistic models that treat all higher education opportunities interchangeably will not work.

*This situation is unsustainable... dependence on tuition will make the Colleges even less affordable. The message needs to get through to our legislators that an investment in higher education is an investment in Vermonters.*

Linda Olson, president of the Vermont State College Faculty Federation, and Tess Conant, president of the Vermont State Colleges United Professionals at LSC. The Orleans Record, October 11, 2011

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The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in January 2012, published A Higher Education Policy Brief addressing the **Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2012**. No surprises. Their number one concern is state operating support. The policy review suggested in 2013 that there may be some improvement in higher education funding, but this follows a period when 36 states saw decreases in state support; 15 states saw double-digit decreases. Upticks, like those predicted for next year, are temporary conditions. The environment in which higher education operates is changing.

State Medicaid funding commitments are predicted to increase for 2013 by almost 30%. The wailing and gnashing of teeth associated with increased costs in public employee health programs, pension programs, unemployment insurance, and continued rising demands for K-12 is reaching deafening levels. State support for higher education continues to be squeezed out of the picture, in part, because we don’t generate a lot of sympathy. Read the newspapers, the sports pages, and the op-eds.

Colleges and universities must focus on models of entrepreneurship tailored to their unique strengths and resources. State flagship institutions, regional universities, and community colleges demand different strategies. State governments like one-size-fits-all solutions, but this becomes problematic if a state system has been designed efficiently because there is little overlap between institutional missions and resources. Each will have different needs and priorities as state support diminishes.

The public flagships need less intervention from the statehouses and more philanthropy and private investment. They only require greater flexibility in setting tuition and fees based on delivery means and methods, as well as individualized benchmarks and the authority to act as autonomous participants in the educational marketplace.

Regional institutions, on the other hand, may need more oversight from the statehouses in order to minimize the duplication of offerings, increase cost-effectiveness, and satisfy the needs of in-state students. The regional institutions, if they are to be successful, must buck the current trend to emulate research universities and focus on specific programs of graduate study, while providing high-quality educational offerings at an economically responsible price to the greatest number of bachelors and masters degree students. Performance criteria for these institutions should be focused on job placement, preparation for graduate study, and professional education.

Community colleges should prioritize efficiency, producing quality course offerings and classroom experiences for students at the lowest possible price. Many community colleges nationally are sneaking into the business of offering baccalaureate degrees. These low-cost, low-oversight and potentially low-quality degrees can be seductive to unsuspecting students and their families, but many of these programs exceed not only the community college's mandate but also their capabilities. Performance standards are needed that look at either job placement or transfer rates to senior institutions for associates degree graduates.

Recognizing the various types of higher education institutions, and developing appropriate benchmarks for measuring excellence at each, creates problems for governing boards, elected officials, and campus leaders. The expectations applied to each institution must be congruent with its mission. While fundraising is critical to the success of research universities, it has much lower value and could be argued no value at all at a community college.

The crux of the challenge for states developing new models of operating support for public higher education is to develop the mission clarity that those of us in higher education have sometimes been unwilling to impose upon ourselves. Good leaders can honestly and straightforwardly explicate the purpose of their particular university in generating value for the state. In the current economic setting, we cannot afford anything less than good university leaders.

Our universities continually evolve. However, evolution implies filling a particular niche in an environment. No university can be all things to all people. States must focus on matching up economically viable educational opportunities with the students who will benefit from them.