Our Universities: Agility

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Agility

Tradition and business-as-usual are flywheels that dampen irregularity and reduce “vibration” in decision-making and organizational action. However, too much of a good thing can smother innovation, risk taking, responsiveness, and agility.

“Progress is a nice word. But change is its motivator. And change has its enemies.”

Robert Kennedy

Fracking is the law of the land in Illinois. I am not going to offer any opinion on the cost or benefits of this means of mining. The officials whom we elect and pay to create and assess the propriety of policies have acted.

A headline in the regional newspaper, The Southern Illinoisan, that reads “SIC, RLC to Offer Fracking Training: Community Colleges Able to Train Job Ready Workforce,” is of special interest. Southeastern Illinois College (SIC) and Rend Lake College (RLC) are community colleges in Harrisburg and Rend Lake, two Illinois service districts. The action implied in the headline highlights something of significance for all post-secondary educational institutions.

According to reporter Becky Malkovich, “Following the legislature’s signing, Southeastern Illinois College and Rend Lake College announced a cooperative agreement to provide training opportunities for those interested in the oil and natural gas industry.” Within hours!

For most post-secondary institutions, this occurred at the speed of light. The two colleges anticipated the legislation and its importance. Economic development and job creation are critical to southern Illinois. Leadership developed a win-win partnership in the carbon rich region of Illinois.

The institutions demonstrated agility and alertness, consistent with the workforce education aspect of their missions.

While this may appear unremarkable to those outside of the post-secondary educational world, it is a bright light in a dark tunnel. Putting aside individualized institutional needs, bean counting, and administrative machination is a form of dexterity. For tax-supported institutions high expectations that benefit the public are right-minded.
And agility provides opportunity.

Environmental and safety complexities assuredly accompany any means of oil and gas extraction, including fracking. An educated workforce, appropriately trained in this evolving technology, is essential. Economic benefits and secure environmental and operating constraints and safety demand knowledgeable, trained individuals.

Lethargy and complacency are enemies of agility. Public higher education has a responsibility to recognize and respond to changing individual, social, technical, economic and environmental forces.

For example, universities have shown reluctance to work with nontraditional students — those who have not graduated high school in the last year or two, or who have a job and kids. They are inadvertently stymied in accessing educational opportunity. Where’s the public benefit? Where’s the agility?

World War II veterans and even early baby boomers will recall Saturday classes on most university campuses. For many reasons, universities have moved away from weekend offerings to a work-like five day week. When demand for university courses outstripped the university’s ability to serve students, this was OK. But no more. And agility is transformed into apathy.

A few universities and some community colleges offer study opportunities through “weekends-only” programs. People with other life commitments are afforded a chance to participate. This is agility.

In order to attain agility many things might be sacrificed. The majority of classes on almost all campuses are offered between 10 AM and 2 PM. This may serve university staff but is neither agile nor responsive to the needs of many learners.

Responsive agile universities could operate 12 months a year, 6 days a week, 16 hours a day for the opportunity and material efficiencies provided.

Agility must never sacrifice academic quality however. The price is too high.

At good universities and community colleges, engaged faculty set standards to ensure excellence for learners. This is the essence of the academic experience. Faculty engagement is paramount because faculty knows what needs to be taught and the limitations and possibilities of successful learning. They must be central in the equation.

The agility represented by SIC and RLC to meet legitimate training and educational needs should be a beacon. Finding ways to respond to changing needs without
sacrificing quality and effectiveness in the educational experience is possible, but it takes work, insight, foresight and creativity…the foundation of all agility.