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The Mote in Thy Brother's Eye

By John V. Lombardi March 25, 2009 4:09 pm

A theme in budget reduction processes in some states is an enthusiasm for cannibalizing some institutions in the hopes of keeping others from suffering

the effects of a state revenue reduction. This is of course a highly political issue, not easily resolved by rational discussions because the number and type of public universities and community colleges in a state reflects the accumulation over a long time of decisions by elected political representatives.

In some states, systems of higher education responded to historical circumstances such as the creation of Land Grant universities or court ordered desegregation that drove investment in large research campuses and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In many states, large community and technical college systems have emerged to provide job related training and college transfer programs. Population growth, political commitments, and economic development considerations, led many states to create four-year-and-beyond higher education systems that include campuses of every type from four-year liberal arts institutions to major public research universities.

The possibly wasteful use of tax dollars to support too many institutions is a popular theme, yet the definition of waste is often relative to the self-interest of the observer. It is a waste to spend money on a community college or a small liberal arts college from the perspective of the research-intensive university because flagship institutions may see their mission as more important to the state than the missions of other institutions. However, from the perspective of the students and communities where these other institutions operate, flagship universities are a wasteful luxury that exist to support major entertainment industries like football and coddle research professors who teach very little and whose discoveries end up nurturing the industries of the Northeast, the West Coast, or boom states of the Southwest.

These charges and counter charges often occur in whispers because the political sensitivity of targeting any particular institution is great. If the HBCU's are untouchable for a host of historical and equity reasons, or if small rural institutions are protected by political influence, then an assault on other institutions elsewhere in the state will not be seen as fair. In addition, the issue of cost is more complicated than it might appear. If the state closes a relatively small institution in a semi-rural area and fires the faculty and staff, we can indeed save money.

This saving is not without another cost. The money saved can make the budget reduction of flagship and other institutions less painful, but the loss of the small semi-rural locations will also ensure that the students who formerly attended these institutions will no longer have an easily accessible college. They may now have to drive two hours a day or more to commute to and from another college. In the effort to keep themselves afloat financially, these students may

find it impossible to hold down two jobs, care for a family, and make the commute. This may not concern the institutions that benefit from cannibalizing the budgets of the smaller colleges, for they will have more money and will not have to work as hard to be more efficient, thanks to the loss of services to citizens in other parts of the state.

Whether the smaller institutions are less cost effective than the big research institutions in a state is a complicated and not easily resolved issue. Many flagships have a much higher cost of instruction than do smaller undergraduate-only institutions, and they often have higher tuition and state support per student. At the same time, public research-intensive universities are critical elements in any state's ability to compete for high wage-rate jobs, a good industrial base, and a vibrant economy. No state can afford to export high value jobs and industries to other states (that do have first rank public research universities), and rely solely on low wage rate blue-collar jobs to drive their economies. The real issue is whether the state is paying a reasonable amount to educate each student that attends a public institution and effectively supporting a first rank public research institution. It is not the number of institutions that matters as much as the cost per student educated, since we should measure the purpose of public higher education not by the number of institutions but by success in educating students and driving the public research university performance that enhances the economic competitiveness of the state.

Institutional cannibalism is probably the least attractive of the devices proposed by some as the way public systems should respond to the challenges of declining state revenue. Individual campus advocates who seek to extract efficiencies from other campuses reducing student opportunities elsewhere in their state, rather than look within their own institution for the savings and adjustments required to deal with state revenue loss, do a disservice to everyone. Perhaps they should turn to scripture and answer the question:

*"And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye,
but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?"*

The best policy perspective is to pay attention to the cost of delivering a college degree and the required investment in nationally competitive public research university performance. Public higher education institutions at all levels require clear measurements of performance relative to cost, compared to other competitive institutions of their type across the country. Whether we educate physicians or welders, promote science or technology, or create high value jobs, the competitive performance of institutions matters, not the number of institutions in the mix. We should not waste any state money, but neither should we assume that prestige, snobbery, or rhetoric are substitutes for effective, measurable, and cost-effective performance as the guide for investing in the future of all the citizens of the state.