

WHO'S ON FIRST?

Because California has forgotten how to reason using the distributed powers in government as checks and balances, the CSU is at the mercy of impulses.

For example, some constituents tell legislators that their children cannot get classes. So, the legislators prescribe online courses as the cure. Private ventures can scale MOOCs to meet demand and reduce per capita cost to nil, according to the press eager for a new angle on higher education.

The legislators do not seem to care that completion rates are low. They crash this solution through the CSU.

Meanwhile financial aid watchdogs growl that college completion rates are low. Retention and time to degree must improve; productivity is too low and slow, says the Governor.

Jeremiahs—they are legion—argue that students no longer learn to think and write; culprits include large classes for access and lax standards for retention.

We ignore the contradictions. We just react to one impulsive complaint or order after another. Priorities shift; they are sand dunes to the political winds.

In effect, the conversation about the CSU has been short-circuited. Term limits, bypassing of the legislature by initiatives, and the rapid spread of news across the internet and social media have frayed the wires. Any issue, it seems, quickly attracts enough champions to rate as critical. And advocates typically have a solution; all that they need is for someone to push the “now” button.

It is time to throw the circuit breaker.

Before fixing the next thing with yet another miracle cure, the CSU, governor, and legislature must agree generally on what is important, how decisions are made, and who properly does what:

- They must have priorities that last and metrics for judging progress toward them.**
- They should respect evidence. Anecdotes are not sufficient evidence to warrant decisions.**
- They must distinguish in each of their roles the authority to declare something from the competencies to devise and do it.**
- Also, they must be realists together. Budgets will not improve appreciably. Technology is not the answer to every question.**

Why are these points important?

In the land of California dreaming and Sutter's Creek, realism does not root easily. We want the paradise regained of free tuition in the Master Plan but are unwilling to commit the public funds. We turn to markets for a silver bullet on finances. But remember the financial bubbles bursting in air in '08? Markets are good at lowering costs by bundling wheat with chaff, tofu with sawdust, and peddling the junk as prime to the people.

Too often, we do not deliberate through problems, though the reputation of higher education is notoriously otherwise. For example, anecdote, gossip, and headline anointed the crisis about bottlenecks. Only then did we look for examples. The already mandated solution had to replace courses now viewed as scarce and costly.

The process, if it can be called that, shut down thinking. Could bottlenecks be consequences of lowering campus targets and thereby blocking FTES already in the system? Could they be linked to lower funding? Might there be low cost fixes like better articulation for transfer students, more efficient scheduling, eliminating unnecessary prerequisites, and etc?

In the early '60s, JFK announced the plan to go to the moon. But he did not design the rocket or mix the fuel. He worked within his sphere of responsibility and competence. Today state leaders not only set goals but also diagnose technical fixes. Data hardly sway them, expertise merely irritates them, and consistency rarely fazes them.

This is a recipe for frustration. We will get nowhere until state leadership fulfills its sphere by aligning broad goals with metrics that experts develop out of common data. In other words, leaders must rise above meddling.

The CSU should welcome reasonable metrics. The reward should be no intrusion if the metric is met, not more money. If the system fails to meet a metric, then the state can intrude an approach. In other words, insisting on more online courses makes sense only if the system fails on enrollment and cost measures.

Funding should be treated separately. It really tracks with available resources, not performance and market. To reduce acrimony and uncertainty about funding, we should index system tuition and fees to an appropriate figure like the median income of a targeted age group. The match from the general fund would be a multiple of this figure. Tuition and fees would rise to close the gap that is opened temporarily by the state not meeting its match; this provision is a check and balance against state disinvestment.

We can stretch funding with incentives. But this requires that we squelch the bureaucratic impulse to penalize irregularity and resist the political temptation to garner marginal gains

for other uses. If the system meets performance metrics, why would the state penalize it for exceeding its target for students? Why would it frown on wage increases that the university covered? The system should be presumed competent to devise the means and deploy the incentives that will produce marginal gains beyond reasonable goals.

The university must adjust to reality, too. It began as a favored child in a California of boundless growth in population and wealth, with few social programs that were competing for support. Today, the population has slowed. Globalization has diverted wealth. Competing programs abound. And competition in higher education, as in other industries, continuously reduces margins, forcing economy and innovation.

These facts are not grounds for claiming that we cannot afford to teach quality programs to more students. Indeed, a major way to remedy many of these facts is to expand such programming. The system can compensate for diminishing resources by sheltering some funds for experiment and investment in change. In other words, we should not expect the state to harbor us from competition and the economy.

State leadership should clarify what major provisions in the Master Plan they can support. Since this requires honesty, not pandering, it likely will not be done well. But we cannot have lasting priorities without such clarification.

- It appears that leaders favor slowing growth in the CSU and thereby reducing the commitment to accept the top third of graduates from high school. Grudgingly, leaders accept that campuses have said that they have no more seats.
- It appears that they have settled on affordability for the middle class as the general criterion for price, having jettisoned free tuition. They have rolled back tuition and fees to less than \$5,500; and they have dedicated new grants to this group.
- It appears that availability, transfer, and completion are nudging leaders to reconsider the extent to which the three tiers ought to be differentiated. Already key policy makers assume that online courses should be open to students from all three segments.

These are major changes, but have they happened? Before we can get to second base, we must know who is on first.

Harry Hellenbrand
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
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