



EDITORIAL

Sun, Feb. 14, 2010

College governance should be more centralized, not less

OUR STATE'S colleges and universities long have complained that they have to jump through too many bureaucratic hoops to satisfy a Legislature that is providing them with ever-smaller portions of their operating budgets. And understandably so.

Theirs tend to be the first budgets cut when money is tight and the last ones restored when the economy roars back. And adding insult to injury, the legislators who lead the charge to slash their budgets complain the most when they raise tuition to make up the difference.

In any event, the precipitous decline in state funding has strengthened the colleges' hand, making it more difficult for lawmakers to argue when officials say that if the state isn't going to fund them, it shouldn't be telling them how to do business.

That's not an entirely illegitimate argument, although it's not as airtight as proponents believe. But if the state can't afford to fund higher education adequately right now, the answer isn't to give up and cut the colleges loose. The answer is the same as it always has been: The Legislature needs to set our state's higher education policy, and it needs to pay to implement that policy.

We are fortunate right now to have excellent leaders of all three of our research universities, and at several of our teaching colleges, who are committed to working together in the best interest of our state.

It has not always been that way. And we have no way of knowing it will continue to be that way. Especially now that we are relying on our research universities to be major economic drivers, we can't afford to trust that college trustees might continue to pick the right kind of presidents, and that the presidents might continue to have the right vision for our state.

The more desperate times are, the more essential it is to step back and think through the possible repercussions of our actions. Sometimes when we do that, we find that we're doing things we should have done long ago but just couldn't. Other times, we realize that we are about to make a colossal mistake.

Pretty much every group that has taken an objective look at our decentralized collection of colleges and universities has recommended a more coherent system, perhaps overseen by a board of regents that can determine the best higher education policies for the state, rather than the best policies for the individual institutions. A system that has the right number of colleges and campuses for our small state - not simply the number that we have. A system that has the right number of medical schools and engineering schools and teachers colleges - not simply the number that individual institutions have decided to create. A system that is focused on producing graduates prepared to fill the jobs of tomorrow.

If it takes an unreasonable amount of time for colleges to get approval to issue bonds, then streamline that process. In fact, streamline the process even if it doesn't take too long; it is so diffused that it encourages buck-passing instead of accountability. If personnel and procurement rules stand in the way of efficiency, then give colleges some more flexibility - within reason.

But don't do any of that as a trade-off for reduced state funding; we need to look to a day when the state will do a better job of contributing to the cost of higher education. If there's to be any trade-off, it should be one that benefits both the colleges and the state as a whole - and from the perspective of the state, that has to start with a coordinated system of governance.

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