

Comments for the Board of Trustees Finance Committee, March 19, 2013

In the past, the governor and legislators only told K-12 not just what to do but how to do it. Now, as their push for more online instruction suggests, they want to “fix” higher education, too. A partly virtual university will not destroy academia as some fear, and simply providing more online classes will not solve all of our financial or enrollment problems. Achieving further economies of scale and cost savings are possible, but to do that requires realism, honesty, and respect.

The CSU is already one of the most effective and efficient systems in the nation. Can we improve? Yes. Can we offer online programs? Yes. In fact, the CSU has already developed many online courses – without legislation.

The enrollment problem has little to do with technology. It has everything to do with politics. The state cut funding for the CSU sharply since '09. In protest, CSU dropped enrollment. It thereby sacrificed student fees and tuition, deepening the financial hole. Indeed, even if campuses could manage to serve more students, they were “dissuaded”—made offers that they could not refuse, so to speak. More students with less state funds would send the wrong message—efficiency—to a capitol that preached but failed to respect productivity.

The expansion of the Virtual CSU will not be a success until Sacramento and Long Beach and labor align their views about enrollment and funding. Also, they need to incentivize productivity. Legislating a fixed standard or means of productivity, like online instruction, today saddles tomorrow with mediocrity.

Ironically, CSU budget tactics of lowering enrollment now haunt it. We are ordered to serve online courses that, like hamburger helper, will stretch resources to meet demand—demand that could have been served in other ways. Dialogue—before mandate—likely would show that the \$10,000,000 designated for the project would have more immediate impact if spent directly on opening more sections of bottlenecked courses.

This is not an argument for the academic freedom of the university to ignore California's financial problems or overlook other social funding needs. It is, rather, an indictment of the posturing, meddling, whining, and gaming that pass as policy today. W. E. Deming, the great industrial thinker who helped to resurrect Japan after WW II, believed that productivity could not be imposed from the top. Wise leaders learned, with humility, how to engage employees in the constant reconstruction of the means of production.

With humility and respect for one another's competency, let us improve student outcomes ensuring high academic attainment. Let us steer clear of unnecessary legislation. The CSU has a new chancellor. Surely, he deserves a chance to lead, beyond implementing unproductive state mandates.

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