



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

March 12, 2014

Unintended Consequences: I had referenced [this article](#) in the Chronicle last week in trying to illustrate the challenges in funding public higher education. As I re-read it, it occurred to me that the article also illustrates the law of unintended consequences. While the specific actions by individuals and state governments were meant to address immediate and short-term problems, unforeseen consequences slowly accumulated leading to the challenges we currently face. Looking ahead, these challenges are becoming even more severe as the enrollment numbers taper off, and therefore state funding, which remains largely dependent on enrollment, is reduced. Note, [for example](#), that the “total enrollment at postsecondary institutions fell about 2 percent from 2011, to 21.1 million. The total number of undergraduates fell slightly, to 18.2 million.” Moreover, “the total revenue for four-year public universities fell \$3.6-billion, or about 1.5 percent, from 2011. Public colleges and universities spent nearly \$300-billion, a year-over-year increase of about 3 percent. Tuition and fees rose as a percentage of revenue at public and private nonprofit four-year colleges. Total state funding for four-year public colleges fell by \$3-billion and total federal funding fell by \$1-billion from 2011. State appropriations now account for a slightly smaller portion of four-year public-college revenue (20.9 percent) than tuition and fees (21.1 percent).”

Focus on Completion: Many states around the country, New Mexico included, have moved toward funding formulas that put more emphasis on outputs such as the number of students graduated, over other measures like the number of raw credit hours accumulated in a given year. In many cases, state legislatures are also weighing into university business more directly, stipulating how their state institutions should facilitate timely graduation. The [state of Maryland](#) is six months into what is considered one of the most comprehensive college completion bills created to date. A few of the more important features of this legislation include remediation reform, streamlining the transfer of credits between two- and four-year institutions, and a limit of 120 credit hours for bachelor’s degree programs (with some exceptions allowed). These are all items that we have taken on at UNM without legislative mandate. Recently, the UNM Faculty Senate voted to lower the minimum number of credit hours required for a bachelor’s degree at UNM from 128 to 120. I’d like to encourage curriculum committees across campus to consider whether or not they can lower their degree requirements to reach this new minimum, while maintaining the quality of their programs. Please investigate other high-performing programs, similar to yours, that have been able to do this, and also keep in mind a statement in the most recent accreditation criteria provided by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), our institutional accreditor: “The institution conforms to commonly accepted minimum program length: 60 semester credits for associate’s degrees, 120 semester credits for bachelor’s degrees, and 30 semester credits beyond the bachelor’s for master’s degrees. Any variation from these minima must be explained and justified.” If you would like to delve more deeply into this topic, we have prepared a report that you may find useful entitled "[Timely Completion at the University of New Mexico: Excessive Credits and Baccalaureate Degree Program Minimums.](#)"

Quality and Feedback: Professor Steve Burd pointed me to [a study](#) that compares student outcomes (both contemporaneous as well as follow-on courses) according to the experience level of the calculus instructor. Their results show that “student evaluations reward professors who increase achievement in the contemporaneous course being taught, not those who increase deep learning.” The study provides a cautionary tale as we attempt to measure the quality of education in our academic programs.

Chaouki Abdallah

Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

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