

Discussion Note

Provost's Committee on University Priorities
University of New Mexico

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Decentralized operation is a leading characteristic of United States higher education. Thousands of colleges and universities make innumerable decisions that essentially are independent of each other and of outside influences. But as in all decentralized systems they require broadly accepted themes and goals to guide choice and avoid anarchy.

Themes and goals need to be amended from time to time as external circumstances and internal considerations evolve. This would be one such time for UNM. Externally, all higher education has suffered a steep decline in public trust and financial support. Internally, the university is in the midst of renewing its most senior leadership. This is an opportune moment to take stock and weigh options.

The two most common ways of taking academic stock are through central high-level commissions and more participatory approaches that start in departments and administrative units and build upwards. Each has its pros and cons but both are inclined to be parochial. Whether for department or university, the tendency is to accentuate and gild the positive, overlook or discount the negative and proclaim how much better things would be with more resources. Most such efforts generate little enthusiasm while underway and scant change when complete.

Higher education's current predicament demands a considerably more thoughtful approach. We are in the unenviable position of having all our constituencies unhappy at the same time. Students and parents complain about ratcheting costs, burdensome debt and inadequate attention from faculty. Legislators, some alumni and the public add to that the unpreparedness of graduates to join the work force, the quality of faculty scholarship, and a perceived leisurely lifestyle. Faculty are displeased by endless

budget stringency, uninterrupted grant writing, growing pressures to become more entrepreneurial, expansions in non-academic bureaucracies and administrative intrusions into academic terrain. Non-academic employees are even more unsettled by budget cutbacks, layoffs and added job duties.

A business as usual outlook would only prolong the disquiet and postpone the day of reckoning. Instead, before broaching the achievements and prospects of individual units, we might examine first how the university conceived of its roles and responsibilities historically, how it does so today, and what has been the practical impact of the conscious and subconscious changes in philosophy and mentality. We may term these first order considerations. It is only after this that we should get to the more traditional second order approaches rooted in the accomplishments and desires of separate units.

It is possible to generalize the most salient changes that have taken place in research universities over the past half-century. They include, in no particular order, tuition increases beyond the rate of inflation, regular building sprees, steep increases in the per capita cost of maintaining science and scientists, a vastly increased temporary (contingent) faculty, greatly enlarged business interests and activities, significant investments in media and publicity, expanded electronic and geographic reach, increasingly intense competition in more aspects of their operations, and defensiveness and denial in the face of external criticism.

Most of these characteristics are interrelated. Two in particular have the widest reach – the inability to control costs and the presence of intense competition. They also have the greatest mutual interconnection and so are prime candidates to begin the exploration of first order considerations.

“Follow the money” is as useful an adage in academia as elsewhere. A full-cost analysis of where financial resources come from and on what they are spent is a key starting point towards discerning changing mores and norms. The accounting goal would not be to compare relative gains and losses of individual units (that comes later) but to detect changes in university priorities and direction and try to interpret the academic and social dynamic behind them.

Any discussion of following the money would involve also the nature and role of academic competition. The explosion in the scope and intensity of institutional rivalry is a defining feature of recent decades. We seem often to compete just for sake of competing, without much regard for consequences and with scant introspection about why we do so. Is so much vying really necessary? What is the purpose and what does it achieve? The issue needs urgent airing in light of egregious contention’s harmful consequences.

The two inquiries will combine to shed substantial light on the other first order issues – why we build so much, why we employ so many contingent faculty, why we always are looking to grow . . . As and more important, they will lead to deeper considerations of ethos, outlook and philosophy -- our *raison d’etre*, who we are as an institution and as a profession, who we serve and who we were meant to serve.

Out of these deliberations will emerge building blocks and decision criteria to apply to the second order review of where we stand and where we wish to go. Implemented this way, the exercise should be more interesting and the results more actionable. Even if, at its close, we choose not to do too many things too differently, it still would have been worth it, for we will have made our choices

with a greater awareness and knowledge of our situation and the tasks before us.