

6 February 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: AASCU Chief Academic Officers

FROM: George L. Mehaffy

SUBJECT: A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste. Thoughts at the Beginning of a New Year

As we confront the worst national financial crisis since the Great Depression, and legislatures all over this country begin to grapple with where and how to make cuts to achieve balanced budgets, my heart goes out to each of you, as you deal with those same issues on your own campus. I have been through downturns before in my own campus career, but nothing quite like what you are confronting. You're not confronting choices between good and bad (you seldom do), but frequently between bad and worse...without knowing which is which.

Yet despite the anxiety and real pain, I hope you can see this difficult period, when your leadership is so desperately needed, also as a time of opportunity. As Rahm Emanuel, the new Chief of Staff for President-Elect Obama, recently said, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste." The fact is that change in the academy is always hard...and almost impossible when things are going well. It is only in times of crisis that people can begin to imagine the unimaginable. If crisis is opportunity, could this be the time that we make changes that improve our institutions? I know that must sound fanciful, given the terrible circumstances, but I truly believe that this is an historic moment of opportunity.

This reduced funding is probably not a short term problem. We're probably facing years of reduced support. As a result, we will likely find more opportunity in existing resources more than new resources. I worry that the gains that we have made in access and quality might be lost during this period of fiscal reduction. So I hope that the changes that we make in our institutions are thought of not only as cost cutting but as strategic investments for the future.

I know that our universities are doing more than we know in the areas of greater effectiveness and greater efficiency; we simply don't have a good way to catalog all of the changes that are occurring. So I've looked at several articles that might be of interest to you.

One of the best is Jane Wellman's ***The Higher Education Funding Disconnect: Spending More, Getting Less***, a recent article in Change Magazine <http://www.changemag.org/November-December%202008/full-funding-disconnect.html>. Jane is a very perceptive observer and commentator on higher education; her recent work has focused on funding of higher education. This article details a number of ways that institutions and systems have increased productivity and effectiveness, strategies that you might consider at your institution, including learning communities, freshman advising before registration, etc. (CSU Long Beach); increased teaching loads, requiring all degrees to be no more than 120 hours,

requiring all students to earn 12 hours in distance education or international study, etc. (University of Maryland System,); and a variety of other approaches.

A second article for your consideration might be a recent Chronicle editorial by William Massy. ***It's Time to Improve Academic, Not Just Administrative, Productivity.*** http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i18/18a02601.htm?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en. Massy mentions the work of Carol Twigg in redesign, the development of the "studio" approach to course design pioneered by Rensselaer Polytechnic, and the use of department-level audits in the Missouri and Tennessee systems.

Because Massy's perspective is largely that of large research universities, some of his suggestions may not be as useful at many AASCU institutions, but nevertheless, his central thesis....that universities should question the core approaches we use for teaching, and focus more attention on teaching outcomes...echoes a report nearly a century ago that sums up rather nicely my concern.

In 1923, the AAUP Committee on College and University Teaching made the following comment. "If even a small portion of the ingenuity and persistence which are now being expended on research of the usual type in American colleges and universities could be deflected...towards research into the results of their own teaching, the improvement in the general standards of collegiate instruction might be considerable."

http://academicaffairs.ucsd.edu/offices/planning/other/wdalo/WDALO_Katz_Article.pdf

Crisis or opportunity? How we answer that may make an enormous difference for the future of our institutions. Throughout the spring, we'll be doing whatever we can here at AASCU to support you in the difficult work ahead. We'll start with some initial discussions at the Winter Meeting in Savannah.

These are perilous times. Yet I am reassured and supported by the knowledge that you, a group of very bright and very talented colleagues, stand ready to help one another, sharing ideas, strategies, and models. For your continued friendship and participation, I am very grateful.

George

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