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ALL IN THE GAME

Give Us Liberty or Give Us Revenue

Should administrators at public universities accept reduced state support in return for more freedom? Sign me up.

By STANLEY FISH

In January of 2002, Mark Yudof, then president of the University of Minnesota, wrote an essay for *The Chronicle* titled "[Is the Public Research University Dead?](#)" (January 11, 2002). Now, less than two years later, the most optimistic answer one could give is "Not yet."

The key word in Yudof's title is "public," which has traditionally been short for "state supported." There's both the rub and the question: In an era of declining state support, when is it no longer accurate to designate an institution "public"?

George M. Dennison, president of the University of Montana at Missoula, recalls that in the '60s and '70s the usual assumption was "that the public should pay from 70 percent to 80 percent of the cost of higher education." Now the figure is more likely to be 25 percent (if you're lucky), and in some states the figure is 10 and headed downward. Only 10 years ago, Dennison reports, the ratio of state-appropriated funds to tuition dollars in his state was 3 to 1. Now it is 2 to 1 in the other direction: "\$1 of state appropriations for every \$2 of tuition and fees."

The university's expenditures, Dennison says, have increased markedly, in part because of a large increase in the number of students it is asked to serve; but "fully 98 percent of the increased funding has come from tuition and fees and private support, not from the state."

The story is the same everywhere, despite what some irresponsible politicians have been saying lately. Even in those states where the raw sums expended on higher education have been rising, the percentage of the budget devoted to higher education -- the figure that means something because it reflects general changes in the cost of doing business and providing services -- is declining.

In Wisconsin and other states the level of state support has been more than halved in the past 15 years. The dilemma was summed up by Katharine C. Lyall, president of the University of Wisconsin System: "They want high access, low tuition, top quality, and no tax increases to pay for it" (*The Chronicle*, February 28).

The result, as Yudof puts it, is a breaking of the compact negotiated long ago by state governments and public research universities: "In return for financial support from taxpayers, universities agreed to keep tuition low and provide access for students from a broad range of economic backgrounds, train graduate and professional students, promote arts and culture, help solve problems in the community, and perform groundbreaking research."

That's a tall order and, up to now, the universities have pretty much been doing their part -- giving educational opportunities to millions who would have otherwise been denied them -- but in recent years they have been largely abandoned by their partners. Nevertheless, universities are regularly told to make do with what they have, tighten their belts, become more efficient, eliminate frills, teach more and pay less.

These, however, are *political* recommendations -- they play to the crowd and do not speak to the realities facing public universities -- and the real response of public higher education to this situation (although few will acknowledge it) has been to follow the state and abandon its half of the contract by raising tuition, narrowing access, closing down graduate programs, eviscerating the humanities and the arts, and cutting funds for research.

The result is predictable, and you can read about it in your daily newspaper: The very legislators who have withdrawn the money now turn around and berate us for not providing what they are unwilling to pay for. "It's outrageous," says Richard S. Jarvis, chancellor of the Oregon University System, "that the state should become a minority partner in educating its undergraduates" (*The Chronicle*, February 28).

Outrageous it may be, but that's the way it is, and the question is, What do universities do now? The answer -- not chosen exactly, but given by default -- is privatization, which usually means a combination of higher tuition, fewer services, aggressive outsourcing, aggressive patenting, distance education, technology transfers, and private donations.

The dangers awaiting those who pursue these strategies (and what public university has not?) have been fully analyzed by Derek Bok in his book *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Princeton University Press, 2003). Bok wrote the book, he tells us, in response to having been brought "one proposition after another to exchange some piece or product of Harvard for money." While at least some of those propositions were economically attractive and superficially plausible, Bok determined that accepting any of them would put the academic mission of the university in jeopardy. Sooner or later, the price for enhanced revenues -- or revenues supposedly enhanced; he doubts, as do I, the size of the gains to be realized -- would be the compromising of the academic mission, as various commercial ventures became the tail that wagged the dog. "Something of irreplaceable value may get lost," he wrote, "in the relentless growth of commercialization."

Or, in other words, what doth it profit a university to gain the world but lose its soul?

Still, Harvard is Harvard, and an administrator at an underfunded public university might be excused for asking, What does Derek Bok's fastidiousness -- admirable as it may be -- have to do with me? I am already in the middle of what he warns against, and I have very little choice if my institution is to survive in anything like its present form.

Well, yes and no. It is true that public universities have neither the leisure nor the endowments to engage in high-minded reflection about their present situations, but there is something they can do. They can privatize, not by default and in a desperate attempt to deal with forces beyond their control, but by design and with a view to creating conditions that would allow the flourishing of those values in whose name Bok writes.

If the old compact has been discarded, make a new one and trade dollars for autonomy. As Jeffrey Selingo observes, with revenues being withdrawn and regulations in the form of accountability measures and tuition caps being imposed, universities are beginning to think "they would be better off with greater control over their own affairs," even if control meant relinquishing even more revenues (*The Chronicle*, February 28).

In Colorado, Maryland, Michigan, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Wisconsin, and other states, educators are bargaining for their independence, offering to accept a reduced level of support and guarantee performance in return for freedom and the opportunity to chart the course of their own destinies.

Sign me up.

After two years of severe cuts, my college's state-funded budget is down to less than \$50-million, and I have \$49-million in salary commitments. Not much room to maneuver.

But if we could set our own tuition, and the dollars came directly to us (as they now do not), we could double the tuition rate (which is now about \$5,000 a year), and, given an enrollment of 10,000 students, we would instantly become a \$100-million college. We could then say to the state, keep your \$50-million, continue to pay for our capital projects, pensions, and health plans, and we promise to give the citizens of Illinois an educational product superior to the product they are unwilling to pay for in tax dollars.

Of course these figures are rough, and adjustments would have to be made in order to provide a student-aid pool large enough to subsidize qualified applicants who could not pay the new rate. And no doubt there would be other problems I haven't thought of. But they could be solved, and as long as we fit into a market niche -- charging more than community and state colleges but much less than private universities -- we would do just fine.

And best of all, the decisions we made would be the right ones because they would be responsive not to the whims of legislators or the ambitions of governors or the self-serving pieties of newspaper editors, but only to our sense of what a liberal education should be. Now, wouldn't that be a new idea!

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