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Avoid False Dichotomy in Higher Education: Be both Mission-Driven and Market-Smart

July 9, 2012

Amid all the drama associated with the departure and reinstatement of the UVA President, there remains at least one generic plot line that merits additional analysis: What is the appropriate way to incorporate a business orientation into the ethos of higher education?

William W. Keep, Dean of the College of Business at the University of New Jersey, raised this question in a [commentary](#) published in the Chronicle on June 21. He concluded by saying that “We in academe need to choose carefully between those aspects of business that serve us well and those that do not”.

I agree with Keep’s conclusion and have long argued that higher education institutions can (and should) be both mission-driven and market smart.

To me, the choice between “instrumentalism” and “bold market-based moves” is a false, and potentially dangerous, dichotomy for higher education. Instead, of choosing leaders that advocate one approach over the other, we need to start developing senior administrators who can appropriately incorporate both strategic planning and strategic dynamism into their leadership approaches.

That is, campus leaders need to know how to juggle (a) student-related concerns associated with academic quality, cost, access, degree completion, and essential learning outcomes with (b) business-related concerns associated with alternative revenue streams, declining public funds, needed private funds, the general financial climate, increasing market competition, and the recognition that mission-creep dilutes institutional “brand”.

The higher education landscape is changing, no doubt. And, we are facing unprecedented challenges.

But, let us not forget that our institutional communities are populated with many of the brightest minds in our country in all areas of academic expertise. At each of our campuses – through inclusive processes involving board members, faculty, staff, students, and alumni — we can leverage our own intellectual capital to strategically plan for the future and to embrace bold new initiatives.

We can plan incremental change, respond to exigencies, and embrace grand, sometimes unexpected, opportunities. We have the knowledge, skill and motivation to be both mission-driven and market-smart. And, I believe that, in the current climate, those institutions that resist this dual approach, will fail their students and their institutional mission.

Marie Comstock

Jayne