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Why Faculties Shouldn't 'Give Back' During Negotiations

By Howard Bunsis

Administrators at some higher-education institutions have recently been using the troubled economy to justify salary freezes and furloughs of faculty members as well as to demand other similar "givebacks" during faculty-union negotiations. But are such moves valid? The clear answer is no. We need administrations to start focusing on the core mission of our colleges and universities: educating our students.

For the United States to overcome and bounce back from today's recession, tomorrow's work force must be highly educated, skilled, creative, and professional. The people whose expertise will help drive the recovery and move our nation onto much firmer footing include future engineers, teachers, scientists, economists, physicians, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and others in widely diverse sectors of industry. They are among the most important assets that we have.

How do we ensure that those people can meet the challenges ahead? We must focus on their education and devote the best resources we have to help them grow intellectually and professionally. If we, as a nation, are going to successfully compete with other countries that are more resilient in overcoming the current financial trials, then the quality and dedication of our learning institutions' professorial talent are key.

Nurturing that talent requires a genuine investment in the people who teach our students. A positive, motivating, intellectual environment to work in is ideal, but we must also pay our faculty members sufficiently.

What we have seen at many institutions is a misplacement of priorities. Administrators have directed millions of dollars to facilities and other endeavors that are not directly related to the core educational missions of our colleges. When we examine the percentage of the total budget that is devoted to the actual process of education, we have seen an alarming decline in recent years. That has led to significant increases in tuition, placing greater burdens on

our students and their families. In essence, that increase in tuition is a form of an excise tax on students and families. The tax is not related to faculty salaries, but to administrations that are not demonstrating a commitment to our students' education.

The Center for College Affordability & Productivity described that trend in a study it announced in April that surveyed nearly 3,000 higher-education institutions. "Colleges have added managers and support personnel at a steady, vigorous clip over the past 20 years, new research shows, far outpacing the growth in student enrollment and instructors," *The Chronicle* noted at the time. Not only are the numbers of administrative personnel growing rapidly, the salaries and benefits that they command are taking a large amount out of universities' revenues.

Meanwhile, it may be surprising to learn that faculty salaries are not a major component of the total costs at most universities. For instance, at my institution, Eastern Michigan University, faculty salaries make up only 24 percent of total expenses. So where is the money going? In recent years, colleges have moved toward financially supporting noneducational endeavors like rock-climbing walls, indoor athletics-practice facilities, and power-washed sidewalks that do not improve the education of the vast majority of students on our campuses.

What does all that mean in terms of college officials' negotiations with faculty members? For administrators to claim during faculty negotiations that their institutions are facing a downturn and need to carry out furloughs and pay freezes is misleading. The financial statements for a number of our public universities indicate that they have increased revenues during this recession. It is no surprise that many of our higher-education institutions receive excellent bond ratings.

The two main sources of revenue at many public universities are tuition and state appropriations. Even in states where the state appropriation has been declining, significant numbers of public institutions have increased student enrollment, helping them more than overcome the decline in the appropriation. (California, which had to turn some students away, is a notable exception.) It is feasible that more than a few colleges are in better financial shape than is claimed or widely believed.

Take Michigan. It is the state with the highest unemployment rate in the country, and it certainly faces budget difficulties. But although the state appropriation represents only about 25 percent of its public universities' total revenue base, public higher-education institutions in Michigan are not in the same condition as General

Motors or as the state as a whole. In states like Michigan, people are returning to colleges and universities in far greater numbers than ever before. Yet even while those institutions are realizing increases in revenue, we, as faculty, find ourselves negotiating with administrations who are crying poverty.

Recently, the American Association of University Professors adopted a "no giveback" resolution. It states: "The sustainable path to higher education's recovery, and contribution to the nation's recovery, lies not in further depleting our faculties, the country's intellectual capital, but in building capacity, reinvesting in faculty and academic professionals, who are essential to increasing student access and success, thereby expanding the nation's human, cultural, and social capital."

The resolution maintains that if a higher-education institution is genuinely in financial difficulty, disproportionate cuts should first come from noneducational expenditures—like the enormous salaries of athletics coaches at most public institutions that aren't supported by athletics revenue. If all other feasible measures have been put into effect and exigency justifies givebacks, faculty members should work to include in any plan conditions that protect current instructional capacity, provide faculty members a greater role in resource allocation, and reverse the trends identified above, which undercut our ability to serve students and society.

Administrations are using the national economic crisis as an excuse to make educational cuts that are not necessary or warranted. It is time for our country to accurately direct its priorities. The economic situation has resulted in people returning to colleges and universities in far greater numbers than ever before. The prospect of an appropriately and competitively educated work force shows greater promise for our nation's long-term viability. As we respond to that influx of students, let us focus on quality higher education, taught by competent and adequately appreciated faculty members.

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