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Delta Project on postsecondary costs, productivity, and accountability: A campus perspective – University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs, Productivity, and Accountability
Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Greater Expectations Institute

A Campus Perspective – University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV)
Patricia Iannuzzi

I will start by pointing out that I don't completely agree with Director Wellman's conclusions that it's a horrible state of affairs when investments from tuition and state sources are misdirected to support non-instruction infrastructure. As a research university with aspirations of enhancing its research agenda, in a state that desperately needs that research UNLV expects to grow those support services in order to grow its research initiatives, and thereby contribute in meaningful ways to the reinvention of the Nevada economy – one sorely hampered by its single industry focus. The Delta Project data calls into question the relationship of research dollars and expenditures and its relationship to the improvement of student success. I agree that there is little relationship but argue that these are two missions of the institution. Other data shows that research universities are required in order to build robust economies in geographic regions. Even the Brookings Institution's seminal report on our region, "Mountain Megas: America's Newest Metropolitan Places and a Federal Partnership to Help them Prosper" underscores the importance of both our research and teaching mission, arguing that:

the challenge is to enhance and leverage their research capacities and high value industry clusters to move up the innovation and productivity curves so as to increase their economic competitiveness and so the local standard of living...

I am not here today to defend the value of research universities, but I need to point out that Wellman's data that implies a misdirection of dollars towards research as distracting from our primary mission is misleading. We cannot cut the child in half – the research and teaching missions are both equally important. The real question is how research universities should protect their teaching mission during difficult economic times without decimating the infrastructures needed for robust research agendas.

So I am here this afternoon with the lens of a single campus to share some of the strategies UNLV implemented to protect and actually strengthen its instructional support in many of the ways suggested by Wellman – although the alignment of our work with her series of recommendations is an astounding coincidence.

During the worst budget crisis in the history of higher education in the State of Nevada, and in spite of the fact that UNLV had the dubious distinction of receiving a cut to its base budget that is the highest in the nation at 34%, we have protected our instructional mission and continue to invest in new initiatives that improve student learning and success. With a state shortfall of \$800 million, UNLV alone had a cut of \$55 million. Wellman's investigations conclude that universities facing cuts tend to apply those cuts in areas that most impact instructional support and she argues that they should instead be protecting and expanding those structures in order to improve retention and decrease time to completion.

Contrary to Wellman's findings, and in spite of the staggering cuts to the university, UNLV has elected to protect and grow precisely those academic support structures noted as most impactful for academic success. Even the title of our recently completed strategic plan underscores the need to focus resources. "Focus: 50-100" is a strategic plan with an ambitious education component and as its title reflects, the main theme was to focus resources on achieving excellence in specific areas by "watering the green spots." I believe UNLV agrees with Wellman's concern that we need to "get students to the

finish line” and that funding on support services to make that happen is central to our mission. The following recommendations from the Delta Project as articulated by Wellman were applied at UNLV:

- Cuts were not applied across the board, but were vertical
- Largest cuts were not in the academic areas, even though that area has the highest proportion of the budget (70% of the budget and 40% of the cuts)
- Administrators were cut at every level, with the highest cuts in the Offices of the President, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and through the elimination of several Dean positions or internal reassignment (Wellman’s “redundant administrative layers” although some of ours were not redundant)
- The division sustaining the highest cut was the Vice President for Finance and Administration, as recommended by Wellman
- Tuition has not been raised – yet (and the data from the Delta project shows UNLV public higher education with still one of the lowest tuitions in the country)
- Efficiencies in utilities and landscaping were made (Wellman’s “energy cuts”)
- All Centers and Institutes were reviewed for efficiencies and self sustainability and several were eliminated
- High cost low yield academic programs were identified and reviewed and were the starting point for program elimination (Wellman’s “under-enrolled and unproductive graduate programs” but also part of her recommendation for “curriculum cleaning.”)
- 35% of part time instructors were eliminated (another of Wellman’s recommendations)

All of these strategies are recommended by Wellman. She further recommends a hard look at sustaining those cuts through a restructuring of revenue streams. UNLV is implementing differential tuition for high cost and high demand programs in order to better sustain them.

Furthermore, the following INVESTMENTS were made, many of which were also coincidentally recommended by Wellman and the Delta Project:

- Launched general education reform that includes university wide learning outcomes (based on LEAP essential learning outcomes) that are embedded across the curriculum at the beginning, middle, and end and that also include high impact practices such as: First year experiences; learning communities; research-based learning; service learning; and intentionally designed culminating experiences
- Created a new Academic Success Center with staff, space, and an array of services that includes diagnostic testing, interventions, and developmental advising
- Opened a new tutoring service and hired some of the laid off adjuncts as coaches
- Created a new minor in “leadership and civic engagement” and a new Office of Civic Engagement with staff to support faculty and students
- Offered stipends to faculty who teach high impact courses to encourage course redesign and to partner with librarians to embed research-based learning and to rethink the way they teach
- Provided intense professional development to faculty to keep active learning approaches as class sizes increase
- Leveraged expertise found across administrative silos by creating a collaboration to provide faculty professional development opportunities

And one focus not mentioned by Wellman but done very successfully at UNLV was to focus fundraising opportunities on undergraduate opportunities that are not just about scholarships, but can be about programs that enhance student academic success (e.g., Engelstad and Lincy – large endowments to create infrastructure for service learning and to link scholarships to service learning components)

Academic administrators responsible for undergraduate education support must learn to package and sell programs that appeal to donors. The two examples provided were supported by the President, but even I, as dean of the Libraries, have managed to structure our fundraising initiatives on undergraduates and student learning and not about books (e.g., endowing Mason Peer Coaches for Undergraduate Research; endowing Calvert Library Award for Undergraduate Research; and securing Library Advisory Board funding to do a Faculty Institute on Research-Based Learning for High Impact Courses)

In sum, I want to thank the Delta Project for its work to collect and analyze data about funding for instructional support and the revelations about student tuition dollars and I want to underscore the importance of leadership at the very top, our President, in recognizing the priority and having the nerve to take the hits and make the cuts and the reallocations needed to support students.