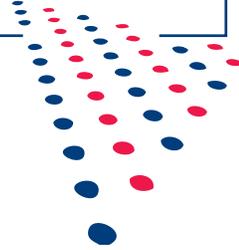


# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2011/2012 Series: **Strategies to Address the Rising Cost of Higher Education**

chapter

## 7: Six Not So Silent Killers of Higher Education

## Six Not So Silent Killers of Higher Education

Dr. Maravene Loeschke: President of Towson University

University administrators recognize that the ever-escalating costs of higher education are swiftly creating a threat to the sustainability of colleges and universities. The threat is especially pressing for small- to medium-size universities with long-held traditional missions. It is easy to identify the universal increased costs of personnel, healthcare, utilities, technology, and building materials. Placed within the context of the current national, state, and local economies, there is reason for our concern. Within the next three years, more institutions will no longer be able to sustain the costs of their missions. There are other issues specific to higher education. This chapter addresses six of them.

### **“They can’t touch me; I have tenure.” (faculty member)**

Tenure was established to protect faculty members from arbitrary job loss due to differences of opinion or inappropriate involvement from non-faculty in academic matters. The concept of tenure was tightly tied to academic freedom when the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) established its declaration of principles in 1915. It was never intended to protect faculty from thorough, meaningful evaluation and professional accountability. Although tenure does not protect elimination of a position for financial reasons, the time required to navigate through the process is too long to relieve immediate financial stress.

Although many senior faculty members are extremely productive, tenure too often protects, for a lifetime, faculty who no longer serve the best interests of students. Such protection is costly, and it compromises flexibility to adjust personnel in quickly changing times. It can take 10 years to hold a tenured faculty member accountable for poor performance. We no longer have the luxury of that time frame. I am not suggesting that tenure be eliminated for those who have it, but it may be time to engage in conversation about whether tenure should

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continue to be the favored *modus operandi* in the future. We need to protect the original values of tenure while replacing the structure with more malleable alternatives for shifting personnel. Three-year renewable contracts, position sharing, and cyclical redefinition of faculty positions are just some of options to be explored.

### **“They can’t touch me; I am union.” (faculty member)**

Unions sprang up in this country, for laudable reasons, as early as the mid-19th century and gained strength in 1935 with the establishment of the Congress on Industrial Organizations. Many brave citizens created a system to protect the rights of workers, including protection from atrocious working conditions. In 1910, the first faculty union began in New Jersey. Like many university presidents, I enjoy a collegial relationship with campus union representatives. The threat is not the productive faculty. One of the most serious threats to long-term university sustainability is the presence of rigid regulations in faculty union policy that often prevents a university from making swift change that is needed to adapt to complex financial times and, actually, save positions. If we are not careful, faculty union policies will be the single factor that threatens, rather than protects, job security for productive faculty.

### **“You either have to put another \$3 million into football or eliminate it, and we know you can’t do that.” (alumnus to president)**

One month after assuming the presidency of Mansfield University, I discovered that I needed to remove \$2 million from the University’s budget within the year. Several academic departments had been cut in the three previous years, and there was no more pruning to do. We chose to drop Division II football. We could not afford to put more funding into football. We did not have enough scholarships to compete in the conference. Retention for players was poor; and we had not won a game in many years. The bottom line was that we were not large enough to sustain the conference costs. We saved \$1.5 million in ongoing costs by moving to another conference in which we could afford to be competitive. We did not want to lose the many positive values that football brings to a campus, so we joined a conference that is a perfect match for a small liberal arts institution. The question needs to be asked, “At what level, and at what cost, can a university afford its athletic program?”

Some athletic programs generate enough revenue to pay for themselves. Others charge hefty student fees to support athletics. There is no question that football is a sacred cow or that cutting back football in any way can be the toughest battle of a president’s career. The question is not the elimination of athletic programs, but rather determining what level is appropriate for the institution. I suggest that more presidents put on armor and, if necessary, fall on the sword. The academy must examine what it can afford to spend on football, or any athletic program, and adjust accordingly. In *College Sports 101*, the Knight Commission suggested in 2009 that “it is time for a serious consideration of intercollegiate athletics to find ways to brake the runaway train of athletic expenses” (25). As Denzel Washington showed us in “Unstoppable,” runaway trains can be stopped.

**“But that has been our mission for 154 years.” (administrator)**

The shifting sands of higher education require entrepreneurship and willingness to re-carve university missions to meet the times. The trick is to do so while maintaining the values upon which the university was built and continues to hold dear. Alumni relations and fundraising are dependent on the institution finding a blend, not a change, of mission. Institutions need the ability to reshape their missions to meet emerging challenges. Higher education is changing too quickly, and competition for students is too intense for anything less than a flexible mission. This is particularly true for those institutions holding tightly to the liberal arts mission. The liberal arts focus will have an adverse effect on sustainability unless it is blended with programs that can support that particular part of the university’s mission. The liberal arts mission is misunderstood by students and parents. While we continue to educate about the value of a liberal arts education, we will need to explore how to craft a liberal arts mission that includes ways to pay for it.

**“I hope the Scarlet Letter is on video; I would hate to have to read it.” (college student when given an assignment)**

Last year, in “Getting Past Go,” Mary Fulton, policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States, estimated that the cost of remedial education hovered at \$2 billion annually (1). This is a significant expense for many institutions, especially those institutions with a mission that focuses on accessibility. High school students are not reading. In March 2006 *ACT News* reported that only 51 percent of high school graduates met the college readiness proficiency levels. The less students read, the less well they can write. K–12 must take the responsibility for the reading crisis. Higher Education must do its part. Rather than whine about the lack of college preparedness, colleges and universities need to partner with K–12 to help solve this national crisis. The work of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is addressing the issue. In August 2011, ACT scores reflected that only one in four high school graduates who took the test demonstrated college readiness. (Valerie Strauss, *Washington Post*) Lack of student success is costly to all, but mostly to the student.

**“I want my daughter to be able to get a good job; I don’t care if she can write.” (parent at orientation)**

This is possibly the most serious killer of all. Pressure from parents, the media, and life’s complexities bring forward the question of the value of a college education, which is no longer the ticket to a good job. In the Northern Tier of Pennsylvania, high school students can get jobs in the gas industry with starting salaries of \$50,000. We all know the long-term value of an education and its effect on the quality of life. But many high school students do not. When measuring the rising costs of tuition against a large starting salary, colleges lose. Dropping enrollments is one of the greatest threats we face in addressing the rising costs of education. In a few years, it is likely that many of these young people will desire an education, perhaps while continuing to work. Proactive universities will plan for innovative, flexible, seamless pathways for those workers wishing to get the college education they later understand to be important.

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It is time for higher education to reopen the conversation, rearticulate our goals, refocus on student success, and assess our effectiveness, even if it means engaging in dialog on issues previously thought to be too volatile.

“We must be courageous, but also reasonable. The world admires us for walking a tightrope without falling off. It asks us to keep our balance.” Lech Walesa

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She began her career as an Actress and Production Assistant at Maryland Public Television. She discovered a love of teaching and became a faculty member in the Theatre Department at Towson University teaching acting, mime, and feminist theatre. She began her administrative career as Chairperson of the Theatre Department. She served as Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communications at Towson University for five years. As Dean she oversaw the architectural award-winning renovation of the Fine Arts Center.

In 2002, she was chosen as Provost of Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and has completed her fifth year as President of Mansfield University.

Dr. Loeschke is the author of three books, a monograph, and numerous scholarly papers and articles including; *All About Mime* (Prentice Hall), *The Path Between* (a historical novel on Emily Dickenson's niece), and *Sixteen Women Who Changed Baltimore Theatre*.