

MOLTING SEASON

In molting season, the skin or shell is shed. The creature is born again to find a new form that fits.

At CSUN, we are well on the way toward discovering that new shape. With 40,000 students, we are one of the most diverse universities in the US. Our graduation figure, which we are working to push over 50% for students who do no transfer, still exceeds the rate that student aid and SATs “predict.” We are increasing research—and students involved in research. Indeed, we are developing new capabilities to enter regional partnerships that improve K-12, develop both high-end and blue-collar jobs, and nurture resilient use of local resources.

Some people resent and/ or deny that we have molted the old skin of a state university.

And who really can blame them? In the old shape we were wholly dependent on the state. We taught more or less lower-middle-class kids with more or less groomed grammar. We were dismissive of research because it purloined our mission; we frowned on Extension. It was something UC Davis did with beekeepers.

Others chide us for not changing enough. Across higher education, we do not heed the market. We do not practice “disruptive innovation.” We have not adopted MOOCs, razed the university, and sold the land.

The irony is, though, that if these critics kept their invisible hands off of us, we would do even better. Despite decreasing state funds, a handful of state universities like CSUN are reinventing themselves successfully.

We are “diversifying” funding sources because states have abandoned state universities, as these institutions have become more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. This is, of course, no coincidence. Some advocates for the dispossessed are more miffed with the university than the state, though. Student fees without state subsidy (from non-resident students, for example) amount to privatization. So does success in Extension and grants and contracts, they claim.

Together, these sources add to our budget at CSUN. These funds defray the cost of the activities that generated them. But they also filter into the general fund; they underwrite our ability to admit more qualified students from LA. And they supplement the base salary of participating tenured and tenure-track faculty. Also, these funds are helping the new Extension building. Its completion frees up for our use a large space in the Extension/bookstore complex.

We must remember that funding from subsidy—the old way—has dwindled.

Yes, CSUN charges students more than they paid fifty years ago. But factor in \$150,000,000 more in aid. That is why students graduate from CSU and, in particular, CSUN with debts loads much lower than national averages.

Clearly, “average” is no solace to the student in financial distress. More relief, though, will require more judicious plays in the education market, not fewer, unless state funding improves.

We are now large enough so that all faculty do not need to do the same thing. We must cooperate as a community, though, and we must evaluate our work so that we can improve it. Sure, there are baseline competencies that we require of everyone. But in the long run, some of us will thrive in teaching basic skills; others will mentor diverse students in STEM pipelines to graduate school. Some will publish “normally”; others we do so in the e-world.

We plan to hire 70-85 faculty in each on the next three years. We are working with the colleges to do some hires annually in clusters according to research interests across departments. And we are going to push hard to increase faculty, staff, and administrative diversity. Doing so will increase our credibility with both students and community. And it will bolster our claim to be minority-serving.

We will confront—and urge the city and county--to confront the implications for the region if we must limit admissions. At the same time, we will collaborate with other CSUs in LA, LACCD, and LAUSD, both to preempt remediation in K-12 and to decrease the time spent on it in college, without diminishing content.

We are beginning to understand our role in developing the innovations that will empower the local economy. And we are beginning to think about how such innovation transfers to educating a workforce amidst constant churn.

You are members of an important academic community. No other state university has responsibility for as large and complex an urban area as we do. The challenges are immense; the resistance will be formidable. Think of it. The inequitable distribution of wealth and opportunity in southern California and the nation counts on regions like this being under-served and passive.

We have a rich legacy of students, community members, faculty, and staff who began to envision a different way in the ‘50s, opened the doors in the ‘60s and ‘70s, converted a satellite into a true university by the ‘80s, survived apocalypse in the ‘90s, and envisioned what we could become thereafter.

No, this is not Agincourt. There will be no St. Crispin’s Day to indulge memories of what we did. There is only now; there is only the challenge to do good work.

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September 2014