

Comment on “Changing the Narrative to one of Full Funding for Public Higher Education”
Prof. David Blitz, ex-officio member, at the Oct. 12, 2022
Budget and Infrastructure Committee meeting

I have a comment, as you might expect, as that seems to be my role as an ex-officio nonvoting member of this committee, but not on the details of this proposal. Please bear with me as I address the general situation, which once more, now at the universities, is moving towards, or in the case of Western, is already in crisis mode.

Once again, the spectre of the “possibility of declaring financial exigency” has arisen, and once more we are looking at the usual proposals for belt tightening and the associated finger pointing (by faculty in response). Yet we live and work in a state with a significant budget surplus, not to mention an overflowing rainy day fund.

Moreover we have a governor who was a distinguished faculty member at one of our institutions, as he mentioned again in his comments preceding the recent panel discussion with the vice-president, and a secretary of education who, as he also noted was a graduate of my university. Clearly, they have benefited from our universities, and understand how our students do the same.

The effect of renewed talk of financial exigency contributes further to the decline in faculty and staff morale, and cannot but affect our students as focus is diverted from improving our teaching and learning to cutting programs and reducing our offerings.

I have a number of comments on financial exigency. In the first place, that terminology has been replaced by “financial crisis” in both the university faculty and staff contracts, with the latter defining it in quite precise terms which I don’t think obtain in the current situation. But aside from this technical consideration, this talk is just more of the same I have heard throughout my 33 now entering my 34th year as a faculty member at one of the constituent universities.

Though this no doubt is part of the established play book for dealing with the legislature it diverts faculty and staff from their student oriented work to the usual complaining about administrative bloat, as if that were the only problem we have. More importantly, the major drawback is that it diverts us from what we should be doing together – calling for and detailing the need for full funding of public higher education as a social good, beneficial not only to our students but to the society as a whole.

That is why the Faculty Advisory Committee has proposed, and I am pleased that the Board has accepted, to discuss full funding for public higher education as the topic for our next joint FAC/BOR meeting in November. We need to change the narrative, from one of fiscal crisis, program elimination and finger pointing to a positive one we can all work together to achieve.