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University of Illinois nurses wounds, hopes to heal

By Jim Nowlan

How, if at all, do budget dysfunction and uncertainty in Illinois state government affect major state institutions? I took a look at my alma mater, the University of Illinois.

With 80,000 students on three campuses, a \$5.6 billion budget, 25,000 employees and 750,000 alumni, the U. of I. is a big deal.

The Jiao Tong University of Shanghai recently ranked the U. of I. as the 25th best university in the world. [Indeed, our state has three universities among the top 25 on the globe—Chicago, Northwestern and Illinois.]

A quick glance at *U.S. News* rankings of graduate school departments shows UI-Urbana in the top ten in many fields, for example: computer science (5); civil engineering (2); materials engineering (4); chemistry (6); physics (9), and so on.

But there has been erosion in recent years. Two decades ago, UI's College of Engineering ranked 3rd best in the country; now it ranks 7th.

Rankings are imperfect, yet everyone uses them as a rule-of-thumb starting place.

And the competition to move up in the rankings, which means more research dollars and better students, is brutal.

Unfortunately, the UI brand has been damaged in recent years by self-inflicted wounds combined with reduced, uncertain state funding in the past decade. In fact, there was no funding whatever in the past year, until measly partial funding came in the recent get-us-through-the-election, stop-gap state budget.

Inadequate and revolving door leadership in the past decade or more gave us an admissions scandal that benefited political insiders and censure widely noted in academe by the national professors' association for hiring practices.

There has also been a sharp spike in tuition in recent years, which made it possible for enrollment-hungry universities in neighboring states to undercut the U.I. tuition and poach many of our best students.

Friends of mine in the suburbs tell me their youngsters have in many cases downgraded the Urbana campus from desirable to maybe an acceptable back-up choice.

An authoritative source told me the U.I. reduced its ACT admission threshold by a point this past year (out of 36 points; thresholds vary by college) in order to shore up enrollment.

This will, of course, reduce the university's ranking in *US News*, so worries of a downward spiral come to mind.

And the damage to the graduate research programs has been "devastating," according to a distinguished scientist in Urbana.

The rankings I cite above are based not on how well a university teaches its undergraduates, no, not at all, but on the academic, especially scientific, contributions made to the world by its faculty and their advanced students.

David Dodds Henry was president of the U.I from 1955-71, who doubled the size of the Big U in his tenure.

"It takes decades to build a great university," said Henry, if I recall correctly, "but it can all be torn down in a flash."

A space scientist with strong academic management credentials, Timothy Killeen has been U.I. president for more than a year now.

Killeen is upbeat about the future, as he has to be. He gave me a new strategic plan for the university, yet the document is heavy on feel-good goals, light on how to achieve them.

Killeen has frozen tuition and helped create a U.I. caucus of alumni lawmakers.

Re-burnishing the U.I. brand will take university-state government collaboration to re-establish fiscal stability, streamline what my inside sources say is a bloated operation, and protect the diamonds in science and engineering for long-term distinction.

I propose that governor and lawmakers create a truly blue-ribbon commission on the future of higher education in our state. The last one, in the 1950s, gave us a strong system from community colleges to research universities.

Second, lawmakers should make it possible for appointment of distinguished alumni of our public universities who live out of state, as many/most do, to our university governing boards.

For the U.I. board, I think of the likes of Marc Andreessen, who basically created the Internet web browser when a student at Urbana, and polymath Thomas Siebel, who has already contributed \$40 million to the U.I.

The university's wounds are deep but not fatal. The big question is: Do we want a full recovery to the greatness that I fear is slipping away?