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University of Illinois in turmoil

By Jim Nowlan

I knew the guy was toast when the faculty came out against him, I told a friend prior to the recent resignation of University of Illinois president Michael Hogan. The university has been in turmoil for several years, and Hogan just added to the problems.

I thought maybe readers, especially alums, would like to know how a big research university operates and what is needed to restore stability.

The university is a big and great institution. Seventy-seven thousand students, 22,000 faculty and staff, and a \$5 billion budget cover three campuses (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield). The Urbana campus ranks fourth among public universities nationally in the number of its major programs in the top 25; indeed all of its programs are in the top 25.

The engineering programs overall rank fifth nationally, second in civil engineering and fifth in computer and electrical engineering. Physics, chemistry and psychology always rank among the top five or ten nationally; library science and entomology are number one in their fields. The Times of London recently ranked the university 23rd in all the world. University faculty have invented everything from the transistor to light emitting diodes to the first effective Internet web browser.

I believe the university's rankings would be even higher if the main campus weren't located in "fly over" country in a modest downstate city where it receives little national media visibility. After all, rankings are often based in large part on the "halo effect" of visibility and historic prestige.

But the university is struggling, and I see slippage in its rankings from earlier decades.

The turmoil began a few years ago when the Chicago Tribune revealed that the university maintained what the paper called a “clout list” that favored candidates for admission who were backed by leading state lawmakers. A university president and most board members resigned as a result.

Then the law school was found to have padded the test scores of some of its applicants for admission, to bolster the school’s all-important ranking in US News & World Report. Recently, the office of President Hogan tried to influence faculty inappropriately, or so faculty thought, over an action that needed their approval.

This past week, the Tribune reported that the school, strapped for money, has spent nearly a quarter million dollars on public relations and law firms and even for “executive coaching” for the president. All this to smooth over problems created in large part by Hogan.

The university is a great graduate research university, especially at Urbana, where research labs and the training of graduate students predominate, while undergraduate teaching is just something the faculty have to do from time to time (and some do it very well). Score-keeping for university prestige is based on the numbers of articles published in important research journals, not on the quality of undergraduate teaching.

And in this rarefied atmosphere of expensive research labs funded largely by federal government grants, distinguished, internationally known faculty and their research teams toil away. The senior faculty are more than willing to let the

administration deal with the hum-drum of day-to-day decisions—but don't get too far out of line nor threaten the quality of the university.

A couple of months ago, a group of about 50 senior faculty wrote a letter, then another letter, to university board members calling for the resignation of President Hogan. Under the tradition of faculty governance and the unspoken threat that these faculty members can always take themselves and their laboratories elsewhere, Hogan resigned and the board quickly accepted his action.

The good news is that incoming president Bob Easter is a savvy country boy from southwest Texas who has been on the Urbana campus since 1976, in faculty and important administrative roles, where he has distinguished himself. He knows the university and how it works, and he is calm but firm.

[His job is to restore stability to the university and wrestle with state government, which now provides less than 20 percent of the university's budget in direct state funding, yet overlays it with many burdensome regulations. I am told, for example, the University library cannot buy a single book without first putting the request out for bid, because of state procurement changes a couple of years ago.]

The biggest challenge for Easter is to focus limited resources, as state funding continues to decline, so as to protect the distinguished programs while down-sizing or eliminating others. If anyone can do this, Bob Easter can.

In the interest of full disclosure, Nowlan holds three degrees from the University of Illinois and is a part-time employee of the university at its Institute of Government and Public Affairs.

