Why public university presidents are under fire

By Jeremi Suri, Special to CNN
June 19, 2012 -- Updated 1323 GMT (2123 HKT)

Editor's note: Jeremi Suri is the Mack Brown Distinguished professor of global leadership, history, and public policy at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of numerous books, including, most recently, "Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama."

(CNN) -- We know an industry is in crisis when its top institutions cannot establish stable leadership. That is the case with some of our nation's best public universities today.

When the Board of Visitors at the University of Virginia pressured President Teresa Sullivan to resign on June 10, she became the fourth leader of a flagship public university to leave office under a cloud of controversy recently.

The other casualties included the highly respected leaders of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Illinois and the University of Oregon. The president of the University of California at Berkeley has also announced that he will step down in December.

Leaders of public universities in other states face equally strong pressures to go. The men and women in these jobs seem to have a target on their backs.

This can't go on.

Our nation's public universities are the heart and soul of Part of complete coverage on Opinion on the news

Keep safeguards to end mercury poisoning
June 19, 2012 -- Updated 1328 GMT (2128 HKT)

Elle Macpherson says it has taken decades to finally get clean-air protections from mercury in place. We can't let Congress overturn them.

Mercury rule at center of the war on coal
June 19, 2012 -- Updated 1435 GMT (2235 HKT)

Sen. James Inhofe says the EPA's excessive rule on mercury and toxic emissions needs to be overturned for the sake of common sense business and energy policies.

Going after Clemens stupid, political
June 19, 2012 -- Updated 1922 GMT (0322 HKT)

Jeff Pearlman says, yes, Roger Clemens cheated, but with all that's wrong in the country, the government's pursuit of the ballplayer was a waste of money.

Follow CNN Opinion on Twitter
Get the latest opinion and analysis from CNN's columnists and contributors.
our higher education system, which is the envy of the world.

Flagship public universities educate more of the brightest high school students than private universities in many states. They conduct the lion’s share of advanced research. They also attract the largest number of foreign students. If our public universities fall into a decline because of a leadership vacuum, then our entire system will decline, too.

University leaders are an endangered species because they are wedged between opposing and powerful pressures that are undermining public universities.

Government officials in state capitals want to cut funding while requiring far-reaching reforms. They demand more control over costs that have risen much faster than inflation or family income in the last decade. They also ask for increased public access to flagship universities through traditional and online forms of education. Governors and legislators want all these benefits as they continue to reduce state expenditures for higher education.

Professors and administrators on campus view these reforms as attacks on serious education and research. Advanced training in the sciences, engineering and humanities requires intensive small-group work that cannot be subjected to assembly-line efficiencies.

Anyone who has taught writing, for example, knows that there is no substitute for the instructor sitting with the student and going line-by-line through each sentence. The same is true for theoretical physics, medicine, law and many other fields. You need extended time and personal contact for young minds to mature as effective thinkers. That is expensive, but it is money well spent for the good of the society.

It’s the same for advanced research. Innovation and creativity require freedom, security and flexibility. Scholars must have the ability to pursue a question in depth and examine its many implications. Sometimes an important project may take years to complete. Without university research of this kind we would not have many of the technologies and medicines we take for granted today.

Governors and legislators have a strong argument about the elitism, the inefficiency and the sometime self-serving nature of university faculty. Professors have a strong case for the merits of what they do, and the remarkable record of achievements and historical job-creation coming out of our best public universities. The system works for some, but not for everyone. The system produces value, but at costs that might not be sustainable.

University leaders are caught in the middle. Governors are impatient for new “efficiencies.” Professors are adamant about protecting the freedom necessary for their work. University presidents have the title to address these issues, but they have little power when funding is tight and the two sides are equally uncompromising. No one wants to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other side’s point of view.

Wealthy alumni groups are very generous and loyal to their alma maters, but they cannot solve this crisis. Although alumni want their universities to be the best in the world, their support (as generous as it may be) cannot replace government money.

Despite steep decreases in state funding for universities, state and federal agencies provide the largest share of money to public universities for research and related activities. The National Institutes of Health, for example, is the dominant funder for medical research in the world. States own the land on which public university
We recommend

Poor and fat: The real class war
The secret gay agenda
Apple’s secret weapon
Why Putin can’t be forced to deal
Mercury rule at center of the war on coal
Will ‘showrooming’ kill businesses?

From around the web

Marina Keegan, Journalist and Playwright, Dies at 22
Do Attractive People Get Preferential Treatment?
(You Beauty)
The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse Are Saddling Up (redOrbit)
Living Within Your Means: A Key to Financial Success (Moneyning.com)
A Secret the Republicans Know But Will Never Admit (The Daily Beast)
2025: The year mankind hits the point of no return? (TheWeek)
What a puff piece.

University salaries for administrators and professors are out of control. For a supposedly "non-profit" field that requires 9 months of committed work a year, it's questionable that so many make $150k+ or $200k+ per year, all while having jobs-for-life security. Meanwhile, most teaching is done by PhD adjuncts who make $40k if they're lucky, and who can be fired at will.

Anonymous010

I don't know what university professors make $150k+ per year. I haven't even ever come close to half that much. Course, I've only ever been non-tenure track, so that might have something to do with it, but having visited the houses of some of my tenured colleagues, if they're making over $150k per year, it sure doesn't look like it.

University administrators, however, are an entirely different story.

8bitprofesso

You clearly have no idea what you are talking about. A professor who makes 150k-200k is at the very top of their field or has been teaching for 20+ years and has the highest rank. The vast majority of tenure track professors make 50-75k, which considering the PhD is 7 years additional schooling, is pretty pathetic. You don't ever get a job like that without having already demonstrated excellence either. I am a humanities professor and my students will often graduate and make more than me in entry level jobs. I have the luxury of the 9 month schedule, but I'm working hard all summer on my own research so that I might someday have that high paying salary too.

Being a professor is no cakewalk or free ride. I'm so sick of seeing this in the media. When you look at public university salary lists, don't just...
gooscientist...Thanks you for an educated response. Research not only helps pay salaries, but
it also provide financial support for graduate students. Aside from the financial side, research
means progress. Some people just don't understand.

Anonymous010, I agree with you. In addition, just because professors don't always teach during
the summer doesn't mean that they aren't working. Like with any other job, you need to
produce in order to stay afloat. There is intense pressure for academic publications. In order to
keep up with this, you are working constantly. If anything, professors are underpaid.

It really depends on your field of study and the university you are at. Research professors in the
sciences frequently make over 100k between grants and their paid salaries by the universities. I
don't know your field anonymous010, but my guess it is not in the sciences. BTW: it is justifiable
for professors in the sciences to make more because they bring in outside money to their
departments that pay for a lot of improvements etc etc. In every grant a portion of the award
goes to the department plus you write in your compensation for the work into the grant and your
grad students your equipment etc etc.

@gooscientist - Actually, my field is physics. In the interest of full disclosure, though, I've never
worked at a large university; only smaller ones. I don't know the exact salaries of my tenured
colleagues, but I do know most of them are over $50k per year. That said, though, their houses
are generally decent, middle class looking houses, not extravagant at all (except for the
department chair). As for the grants, they typically don't talk about it. I've never gotten one (my
research was cheap), so I couldn't say how much of it goes to the professor and how much
goes to the school.

sci1

ncwd...Blanket statements and generalizations are misleading and deceptive. While your
scenario may be true for some, it does not apply to all. UT is a very wealthy University and
many of those administrators and faculty work more than 9 months out of the year.
Administrations work year round and most work more than 40 hours a week. Presidents,
Provosts and many VP's are never off work and give much of their personal time to their
University.

This is just another divide and concur article meant to make the poor and middle class fight
over pay while the presidents/CEO's and the 1% make out like bandits. Keep fighting people
while wall street and the 1% take your money and dreams away.

Search "UT Employee Salary Database"

Who would want the job now? Most "state" universities now receive less than 20% of their support from
the state. Faculty pay is still good but hasn't kept pace over the last 20 years, employe benefits have
had to be cut, federal grants are funded at ~11%, and students keep getting hit with tuition increases as
Why public university presidents are under fire – CNN.com

a last resort. We put too much emphasis on collegiate sports rather than academic excellence.

8 hours ago 14 Likes

Anonymous010

Actually, typically an athletic program costs the university money; not the other way around. Research grants are the real bread and butter of universities. That's why universities require faculty to devote so many hours to research.

7 hours ago in reply to effingeff 2 Likes

Qroozer

It's either "collegiate sports" or a "bake sale". Or both. Take your pick. "collegiate sports" sounds more fun to me.

7 hours ago in reply to effingeff

chef

As a former college president (one who did not get fired) and a strategic planning consultant, I see the lack of forward-looking strategies as being the biggest threat to a viable higher education system. Be it a business or a college, if you know for sure that you will have to change but don't have the foggiest notion about how to go about it, you are in deep trouble. Looking back at my former clients the biggest problem they had was understanding that strategies are 100% conceptual in nature and can't be mixed into some big mess along with tactics. The second biggest problem was to curb their immediate reaction to form a committee, most of the time the way to large. If you want to see how well a committee works just look at Congress and I will have made my point.

8 hours ago 11 Likes

Damion_Standish

Let's see, you're a former college president and your input amounts to an ad hominem on the lack of visionaries, conceptual strategies, too many committees, and an ever so easy attack on an inept congress. Instead of offering useless pejoratives, why don't you cite areas of saving the typical university can take advantage of. Why don't you discuss why costs have risen so greatly over the last 50 years (out of step with industry), i.e., what forces are at work here. Say something tangible, and less conceptual. I'm wondering why they'd fire such a beautiful mind... such a visionary, such a practical leader, as yourself.

8 hours ago in reply to chef 9 Likes

streetview

Actually, as someone who worked at a university for a significant part of my career I can say that sometimes its the forward thinking that gets these institutions into trouble. I saw my university switch from an educational centered model under one president be tossed aside for a revenue generating one under new leadership. Tuition was raised the maximum allowed every year, class sizes increased, useless classes were a requirement for every student (The best was an entire semester dedicated to knowing the layout of the campus). All decent faculty were relieved of their teaching duties to pursue revenue/recognition endeavors and over 70% of the classes were taught by graduate students (many with very limited English speaking capabilities).

All of these changes were were planned, and touted as the new american university. While the university did see greater funds, I saw no gain in education quality, quite the opposite.

Some think...

7 hours ago in reply to chef 7 Likes

Qroozer

I would have fired you for using "to" instead of "too". Leaders like college presidents may not be perfect, but you should strive for academic excellence, and using "to" and "too" correctly - and proofreading - are a terribly easy place to start. Also, bashing Congress, also known as "We the People", makes you sound like just another simple-minded sheep mislead by the media. Again, something for which I would have fired you.

7 hours ago in reply to chef 3 Likes

chef

Let's see, you're a former college president and your input amounts to an ad hominem on the lack of visionaries, conceptual strategies, too many committees, and an ever so easy attack on an inept congress. Instead of offering useless pejoratives, why don't you cite areas of saving the typical university can take advantage of. Why don't you discuss why costs have risen so greatly over the last 50 years (out of step with industry), i.e., what forces are at work here. Say something tangible, and less conceptual. I'm wondering why they'd fire such a beautiful mind... such a visionary, such a practical leader, as yourself.

8 hours ago 11 Likes

Damion_Standish

Let's see, you're a former college president and your input amounts to an ad hominem on the lack of visionaries, conceptual strategies, too many committees, and an ever so easy attack on an inept congress. Instead of offering useless pejoratives, why don't you cite areas of saving the typical university can take advantage of. Why don't you discuss why costs have risen so greatly over the last 50 years (out of step with industry), i.e., what forces are at work here. Say something tangible, and less conceptual. I'm wondering why they'd fire such a beautiful mind... such a visionary, such a practical leader, as yourself.

8 hours ago in reply to chef 9 Likes

streetview

Actually, as someone who worked at a university for a significant part of my career I can say that sometimes its the forward thinking that gets these institutions into trouble. I saw my university switch from an educational centered model under one president be tossed aside for a revenue generating one under new leadership. Tuition was raised the maximum allowed every year, class sizes increased, useless classes were a requirement for every student (The best was an entire semester dedicated to knowing the layout of the campus). All decent faculty were relieved of their teaching duties to pursue revenue/recognition endeavors and over 70% of the classes were taught by graduate students (many with very limited English speaking capabilities).

All of these changes were were planned, and touted as the new american university. While the university did see greater funds, I saw no gain in education quality, quite the opposite.

Some think...

show more

7 hours ago in reply to chef 7 Likes

Qroozer

I would have fired you for using "to" instead of "too". Leaders like college presidents may not be perfect, but you should strive for academic excellence, and using "to" and "too" correctly - and proofreading - are a terribly easy place to start. Also, bashing Congress, also known as "We the People", makes you sound like just another simple-minded sheep mislead by the media. Again, something for which I would have fired you.

7 hours ago in reply to chef 3 Likes

chef

Let's see, you're a former college president and your input amounts to an ad hominem on the lack of visionaries, conceptual strategies, too many committees, and an ever so easy attack on an inept congress. Instead of offering useless pejoratives, why don't you cite areas of saving the typical university can take advantage of. Why don't you discuss why costs have risen so greatly over the last 50 years (out of step with industry), i.e., what forces are at work here. Say something tangible, and less conceptual. I'm wondering why they'd fire such a beautiful mind... such a visionary, such a practical leader, as yourself.

8 hours ago 11 Likes

Damion_Standish

Let's see, you're a former college president and your input amounts to an ad hominem on the lack of visionaries, conceptual strategies, too many committees, and an ever so easy attack on an inept congress. Instead of offering useless pejoratives, why don't you cite areas of saving the typical university can take advantage of. Why don't you discuss why costs have risen so greatly over the last 50 years (out of step with industry), i.e., what forces are at work here. Say something tangible, and less conceptual. I'm wondering why they'd fire such a beautiful mind... such a visionary, such a practical leader, as yourself.

8 hours ago in reply to chef 9 Likes

streetview

Actually, as someone who worked at a university for a significant part of my career I can say that sometimes its the forward thinking that gets these institutions into trouble. I saw my university switch from an educational centered model under one president be tossed aside for a revenue generating one under new leadership. Tuition was raised the maximum allowed every year, class sizes increased, useless classes were a requirement for every student (The best was an entire semester dedicated to knowing the layout of the campus). All decent faculty were relieved of their teaching duties to pursue revenue/recognition endeavors and over 70% of the classes were taught by graduate students (many with very limited English speaking capabilities).

All of these changes were were planned, and touted as the new american university. While the university did see greater funds, I saw no gain in education quality, quite the opposite.

Some think...

show more

7 hours ago in reply to chef 7 Likes

Qroozer

I would have fired you for using "to" instead of "too". Leaders like college presidents may not be perfect, but you should strive for academic excellence, and using "to" and "too" correctly - and proofreading - are a terribly easy place to start. Also, bashing Congress, also known as "We the People", makes you sound like just another simple-minded sheep mislead by the media. Again, something for which I would have fired you.

7 hours ago in reply to chef 3 Likes

chef
I apologize for the to instead of too. Glad to get that earthshaking error off my page! You should join nitpickers for public education. Also, forgive me for the easy attack on an inept congress. Is there one that is not so easy? As for areas of savings, that's what is supposed to come out of a good strategic plan. However, if you look at the basics of a university, they pay professors to teach, they put in the equipment to help them do that, they then charge students for those services. See any loopholes so far? Since they own their physical plant it can't be that. They don't pay taxes so it can't be that. My first guess is that they are way, way too top heavy (notice I said too) with administrative and support personnel and they are paying some professors way beyond their actual worth. Especially state...

show more

2 hours ago  in reply to chef  2 Likes
Like

plugugly

As a nation, we can no longer afford all the nice things we used to take for granted. One of those nice things is higher education for the functionally illiterate, which chef mentioned. Kick their arses onto the street, and quit wasting money on people who can take no benefit from what ought to be considered a luxury education.

Also, dump the dumb classes. Limit access to some areas of education to something like twice what the market can absorb (just how many journalism graduates are going to find work as journalists?) and push students into areas where there is a need, such as engineering and mathematics.

Finally, dump the dumb jocks. The purpose of college is not athletics, it is education. If they can't pull the grades, get rid of them.

37 minutes ago  in reply to chef  Like

Anonymous010

streetview has it right. The purpose of a college or university should be to educate its students, but that costs a lot of money and public funding plus tuition doesn't even come close to covering the costs. So, colleges and universities shift gears and adopt profit making strategies. If they create successful strategies, they then start figuring out how to make more, and eventually they begin placing their focus almost entirely into making money and becoming a profitable enterprise, and as a result, education at the institution generally suffers. Professors and instructors do the best they can with what they have, but it's largely out of our hands. We're just cogs in the machine.

3 hours ago  in reply to chef  Like

Jeepers01

You know what bugs me? The salaries they pay head football coaches at some of the bigger schools. Is that really what is important to our society? Really?

7 hours ago  9 Likes  Like  Reply

Jeepers01

You missed my point. Does football really contribute to our society?

4 hours ago  6 Likes  Like

gooscientist

Football coaches pay for themselves and all other coaches salaries at almost all major universities. Football literally supports all other sports except maybe basketball. Without good coaches and football teams you would have no other sports in college say goodbye to all those kids helped by being able to play a sport in college. Furthermore, people donate large sums of money to those programs so that they can enjoy the entertainment value its idiotic to complain about something that actually makes money at a university and helps the university.

6 hours ago  in reply to Jeepers01  4 Likes  Like

gnodat1

goosecientist How many people donated to sanduski in order to keep him as head coach even after they knew what he was doing????

1 hour ago  in reply to Jeepers01  Like