



Why public university presidents are under fire

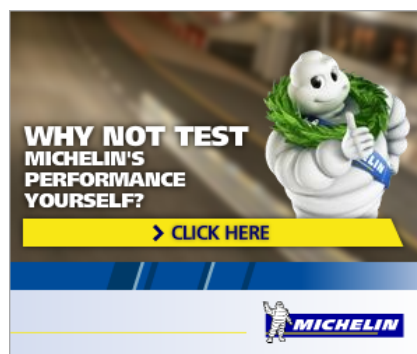
By **Jeremi Suri**, Special to CNN
June 19, 2012 -- Updated 1323 GMT (2123 HKT)

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University of California, Berkeley, will have to find a new president at the end of the year.



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Jeremi Suri: Some of the best public universities in America are losing their presidents

Suri: University leaders are caught between pressures from state officials and faculty

He says reforms to these institutions are needed, but political attacks and budget cuts won't help

Suri: University presidents should be empowered to pursue common goals

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

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Jeremi Suri

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.

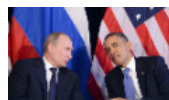
Despite steep decreases in state funding for universities, state and federal agencies provide the largest share of money to public universities for research and related activities. The National Institutes of Health, for example, is the dominant funder for medical research in the world. States own the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

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campuses are built.

So where do we go from here?

Reforms to public universities are indeed necessary, but they will not emerge effectively from political attacks and vindictive cuts.

What we need is an open and participatory process where university boards, state leaders, faculty, students and campus presidents formulate measurable goals for reasonable reforms, cost-savings, and more efficiency. These discussions should also include meaningful incentives for increased excellence (in teaching and research), public accessibility and international recognition. University presidents should be empowered to pursue these goals, in a reasonable time frame, with transparent accountability.

While faculty must preserve the essential freedoms for their creativity, they cannot expect to do this by protecting privileges at all costs. Along with administrators, they have to accept changes to their comfortable routines. If both state and campus communities contribute to mutually beneficial changes, the reformed public university of the 21st century will be much improved.

At present, the attacks on university leaders from all sides are attacks on the very idea of a public university. When Thomas Jefferson designed the University of Virginia, and when Abraham Lincoln created the federal land-grant system to finance public education, they had a faith that the most advanced intellectual work would improve the nation as a whole. That is what they meant by the "public" in university. Jefferson and Lincoln's support for public higher education made the United States a model for the rest of the world.

We need leaders in government and on campus with the same vision -- the same desire to use limited resources not as instruments for political or personal advantage, but as opportunities for constructive engagement and the greatest long-term public good. Public universities need protection and they also need serious, thoughtful reform. Let's start with giving university presidents a fair chance to do their work.

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Carville has entered the pantheon of sports figures implicated in doping--a betrayal of fans and all athletes, who will soon forget him

Carville: What if the rich lost 40% of their wealth?

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James Carville says that if America's upper class lost 40% of its wealth, there would be panic. So where's the outrage about the middle class?

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ncwd

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.

7 hours ago 14 Likes

Like Reply

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.

7 hours ago in reply to ncwd 10 Likes

Like

stormchaser1983

[ncwd](#) you have to rethink your statement. A professor in the STEM fields for example, at any mid range-top university, is in fact a world leader in that specific specialty, and has graduated from top universities with their PhDs. They would probably make 5 times as much over their lifetime if they went to industry. They are the very best at what they do and do the fundamental research that drives innovation, maybe not in the immediate future, but still is crucial. And teach that knowledge to students, prepping them for the best jobs. Why would you complain if the top mind gets paid \$130k??? Benefits far far far far outweigh the costs....educate yourself ncwd!!!

4 hours ago in reply to ncwd 4 Likes

Like

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...

[show more](#)

3 hours ago in reply to ncwd 3 Likes

Like

**Sci1**

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.

6 hours ago in reply to ncwd 3 Likes

Like

**ad987**

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.

1 hour ago in reply to ncwd 2 Likes

Like

**gooscientist**

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.

6 hours ago in reply to ncwd 2 Likes

Like

**Anonymous010**

@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.

6 hours ago in reply to ncwd 1 Like

Like

**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.

6 hours ago in reply to ncwd 1 Like

Like

**Dustymack**

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.

2 hours ago in reply to ncwd

Like

**ncwd**

Search "UT Employee Salary Database"

7 hours ago in reply to ncwd

Like

**effingeff**

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, employee benefits have had to be cut, federal grants are funded at ~11%, and students keep getting hit with tuition increases as

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

8 hours ago 14 Likes

Like Reply



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

Like



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

Like



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 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

Like Reply



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

Like



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...

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7 hours ago in reply to chef 7 Likes

Like



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 misled by the media. Again, something for which I would have fired you.

7 hours ago in reply to chef 3 Likes

Like



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...

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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 in reply to Jeepers01 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



nodat1

geoscientist 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

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