A plea for budgetary leadership

Dear Members of the Board of Regents,

It is now January 22, 2015, and the academic units of UH Mānoa are still awaiting direction from our interim Chancellor and upper administration on our budget and planning for next year. We have received no change in allocation, no information from the interim Chancellor’s budget committee, and no operating directions other than to remain within our inadequate allocations.

Everyone agrees that the Colleges of Arts and Sciences are underfunded, yet nothing is happening. Perhaps the administration has already forgotten that a lack of action on their part resulted in a crisis last semester when TAs had to be let go. The prospect of the same thing happening is looming large in many departments because the time is getting late and plans need to be made for next year. Only this time it will be worse because cuts planned last semester did not occur, and with no change in allocation, the cuts must be deeper now, if nothing changes.

Faculty are grappling with such questions as:

1) How will we offer classes if we don’t have enough money?
2) Do we water down our degrees?
3) Or do we restrict admission to our student body?
4) What will happen if we lose our lecturers? It is hard enough to attract qualified and talented lecturers, it becomes impossible when it has to occur at the last minute or after a round of firings.
5) What happens if our colleagues retire? Or die? This happens.
6) Is it ethical to admit graduate students next year? Or do we tell these talented young people to go elsewhere where their contributions will be valued?

It is hard to believe that it is possible, but morale is even lower than before. Faculty grappling with these issues are burnt out. Tired. Tired of spending all of their time going round and round choosing which critical need is more important than the others.

The President, interim Chancellor, and permanent and interim VCs tell the legislature and the BOR that we are doing well, touting “15 to finish” and improved graduation rates. But, critically, they ignore the fact that these small gains were attained by opening gateway courses and offering many more sections, and that these actions cost money that they are not willing to pay. They did not fund these directives, and now the instructional units are “in debt.” Every time they tout these initiatives, and go so far as to propose increasing enrollment even further, without providing the support to teach the students, the experience for me is like a slap in the face from a surreal disconnect with reality.
Why can’t they see that if allocations remain flat, and no emergency funds are offered, there will be tremendous pain down the line? Class sizes have already ballooned well beyond the ideal. If allocations remain flat, departments like mathematics will have to close 20-30 classes. This will not hurt their own majors, but it will hurt every other STEM major, as math is required for graduation by thousands of our students. Biology, for example, will have to cut more TAs. We hire not only our own graduate students, but graduate students also from Marine Biology, Microbiology, Botany, CTAHR, SOEST, and JABSOM. The biology ‘engine’ supports many graduate programs, all of which will lose talented students. Our undergraduates will have many fewer laboratory sections to fulfill their degrees. These are just examples, there are many other departments and colleges that are in dire straights.

The truth is we are already losing talented graduate and undergraduate students. Who wants to come here where their education is not supported? How long will this game of chicken with the futures of our young people go on?

Faculty are wondering “why doesn’t the administration lead?” Yes, hard decisions must be made. Don’t they understand that by not making them, it makes the situation worse? It further removes the ability to plan. We will face the grim reality with no time to prepare.

Is it their plan to pop this on us during the summer, parallelling the firing of Chancellor Apple? The summer always used to be a time of renewal, with high research activity and study, a time to look forward to. Now it feels more like open season on vulnerable sectors of the campus.

Personally, I am wondering why we are paying these people at all, to do nothing? We can have nothing happening at a much cheaper price. Returning those administrative salaries to Mānoa would provide a lot of seats for students to graduate on time. Please hold these failing administrators accountable. Better yet, return to us a strong Mānoa Chancellor who can lead, like our Tom Apple, and give our Chancellor the authority to do their work.

I fully endorse IMM’s call for an immediate international search for a permanent Manoa Chancellor.

Sincerely,

Marguerite Butler
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Member of I Mua Mānoa