Academic Department Survival: Lessons Learned and Future Implications

John M. Dunn

Higher education is attracting enormous attention. Interest comes from all sectors, including governors, legislators, publishers, editors, citizens of all political persuasions, students, parents, and, of course, university colleagues and administrators. While interest is high, the associated outcomes have generated significant concerns, with many concluding that all is not well (Redican & Bafi, 1997). In this paper, I will identify and briefly discuss several factors influencing higher education and the subsequent impact on kinesiology departments. Academic kinesiology departments cannot ignore trends affecting the larger whole. To survive, we must be informed and cognizant of the larger picture and understand how it directly and indirectly affects other parts, specifically the academic department.

Factors Affecting Higher Education

Higher Education Is Broken

Many people have suggested that higher education problems are so endemic that the organization as a whole is broken. Critics cite various problems, including overcharging on governmental contracts, athletic scandals, administrative bloat, increasing costs, research replacing teaching, and faculty time spent in the classroom. While counterarguments exist, and not all institutions are equally at fault, concerns are often generalized to all institutions, with a primary emphasis directed toward Research 1 programs (Magrath, 1997; Evangelauf, 1994).

Financial and Budget Woes

Higher education critics and supporters generally agree that higher education institutions are experiencing significant financial challenges, such that future industrial growth will be slow. The reasons for this vary from state to state, but...
commonly cited concerns include enrollment shortfalls, significantly increased nonpersonnel costs, and state-appropriated increases less than the rate of inflation (Healy, 1997). The situation is so serious in many prestigious public institutions that critics suggest that state located is more appropriate than state funded.

**Productivity in Question**

Many people are concerned that faculty spend too much time on scholarship and research and devote insufficient time to direct student instruction. Arguments for the triad responsibilities of faculty (teaching, scholarship, and service) have been met with strong resistance from key policymakers. The result has often led to state legislation mandating instructional workloads. Others have argued that tenure is an outmoded concept that reduces flexibility in faculty appointments and, thus, faculty productivity (De Pasquale, Hendricks, & Keiger, 1997).

**Educational Reform Is Needed**

Funding shortfalls and cries to meet students’ higher education needs have led to several new educational reforms. This includes time-shortened degrees (i.e., 3- rather than 4-year baccalaureate degree programs), technology and the virtual university, private partnerships, and renewed emphasis and interest on internships and practica (e.g., service learning opportunities; Kellogg Commission, 1997).

Educational reform proponents argue that current approaches to enhancing fundamental skills, such as writing and communication, are not working. Governors in the western United States have lobbied for using technology to deliver courses closer to the student’s home or workplace, thus reducing the need to expand or build new campuses.

**Response to Increasing Pressures**

Higher education administrators have responded to the increasing challenges and pressures in several ways. Strategies have included efforts to reengineer and streamline selected processes (e.g., shortening billing procedures). Many efforts have aimed to reduce unnecessary administrative costs, so that funds can be redirected to academic units. In addition, administrators have enhanced revenues by increasing or differentiating general tuition, such that students in selected popular programs pay a higher tuition. In states where tuition has been relatively stable (e.g., Texas), additional revenues have been generated by implementing or increasing course fees, which now approximate general tuition.

Some institutions have focused on increasing enrollment, particularly among out-of-state students who are assessed a higher tuition. Fundraising efforts have also expanded with increasing numbers of development officers within the university. However, many institution administrators have ultimately concluded that eliminating or reducing academic programs is the only viable way to balance the budget. Unfortunately, this has lead to downsizing, merging, or eliminating selected programs altogether. Many disciplines have been affected, but the particular impact on kinesiology programs has been severe (Maksud, 1994).

The remainder of this paper will focus on lessons that have been learned and steps to prevent program closures or elimination. The information that follows is based on my observations of selected programs and information gleaned form higher education literature. Not all of the following points apply to all institutions,
so I urge you to analyze the information in the context of variables that are most pertinent to your own institution and setting.

**Lessons Learned: Implications for the Future**

**Leadership Is Important**

Leadership at all levels is essential to establishing institutional priorities, assessing program effectiveness, and establishing a set of values for guiding institutions. In particular, presidents and provosts are key to decisions about resource allocations and program reductions. Central administrators enter these discussions with experience and bias that must be recognized. Deans and department chairs who have established positive relationships with key administrators are well positioned when discussions focus on substantive budgetary issues. Even during severe disagreement, positions that are articulated using good data and a professional manner are well received if the source is credible.

In addition to the president and other key administrators, the academic senate can be a powerful ally in discussions related to the value or significance of a selected program. On many campuses, faculty leaders have learned to appreciate kinesiology departments, because these individuals have benefited from faculty/staff fitness programs and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues in kinesiology. Such interactions help dispel old myths about kinesiology programs and their relevance and evolution. Many distinguished leaders in our profession have been elected to key senate leadership positions or chosen as president of the faculty senate. Such recognition enhances both the individual and the profession and serves as a powerful reminder to central administrators that kinesiology and the associated faculty are integral to the success of the institution.

**Organizational Structure Can Make a Difference**

During tough times, organizational nature and structure can become assets or liabilities. For example, if decisions about eliminating programs or allocating resources are made at the statewide system level rather than the individual campus, the department chair’s position may be compromised. Likewise, if a kinesiology department is housed within a college structure where kinesiology is not valued, the structural nature may impose additional constraints on arguments related to the department mission and outcome. Equally important is whether the department is fully integrated into several aspects of the university campus. For kinesiology departments, this would mean strong undergraduate and graduate programs as well as service courses that provide meaningful experiences for students majoring in various areas within the university. In addition, some kinesiology departments have developed outstanding faculty/staff fitness programs. The goal is to demonstrate the importance of exercise and broaden the support base by touching the university community in every possible way. This strategy will help broaden the support base and provide a strong foundation of organizational support for the unit.

Naming a department is closely related to college structure and affiliation. While opinions about naming physical education departments vary, most of our colleagues agree that the name of a unit is closely linked to organizational structure. For example, *physical education* suggests that departmental affiliation should
Resources Are Limited

Others are not and deserve

that program with the new. For example, the pedagogical aspects of the neuroscience program

all continue to be the dominant institution, and the resources are not.

Several others need an exclusive career option. Successful programs have applied

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to use their neuroscience education and professional fields. An apparent

are frequently cited early in such careers. Furthermore, even without

systems of neuroscience researches, many have their neuroscience, including this

exercise and study to determine duplication by eliminating the overlap in neuroscience after

A primary goal of most state systems of higher education is avoiding pro-

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investment and return, input and output, is even greater today (The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 1994). In the past, most of the resources necessary for managing the academic department came from the state, but this is no longer the case (Maksud, 1994). Generating resources has been increasingly emphasized (e.g., fitness testing fees or industry contracts for product testing). Successful kinesiology departments are doing both (i.e., reducing costs, where possible, and generating revenues).

Assessing costs closely relates to administrative structure and function. This includes the money devoted to department administration (e.g., personnel costs) as well as costs analysis for selected functions, including frequency and length of departmental meetings. The bottom line is that successful units have become more adroit and focused with respect to cost analysis and selected investment returns (e.g., the criticality of decisions related to faculty appointments and tenure decisions). On the revenue side, there is a limit on the amount of funds that can be generated through grants, contracts, and private gifts. However, many kinesiology departments have experienced success in acquiring external funds. The message is clear: kinesiology represents an excellent investment, and people who invest in us will normally find a sizable return.

**Quality Counts**

My emphases thus far suggest that productivity measures are more important than quality. This is not true. While budget reductions and fund shortages do tempt leaders to overlook academic quality, successful administrators and faculty know that this short-term, bottom-line approach is dangerous. In fact, successful academic programs continuously assess performance levels. Some measures include standards from accrediting agencies, benchmarks using outstanding programs in the field, and faculty reviews focusing on performance outcome levels. In addition, many academic personnel invite input from external constituents (i.e., employers and leading professionals) and alumni to help assess the unit and outcome measures. The external review facilitates validating curriculum offerings and communicating program status and criticality to both the institution and society. This latter point may pay rich dividends when internal reviews are conducted. There are few things that strike more fear in central administrators than an outraged and organized alumni.

**Continuous Improvement Is Essential**

Successful kinesiology program administrators understand that continuous improvement is expected. This applies to all aspects of the organization and includes faculty and graduate student performance as well as outcome measures, such as scholarship, service, and teaching productivity. Examples include a trend line indicating that faculty are publishing more, especially in quality journals, or presenting more papers at national and international meetings of import. With respect to teaching, measures would be identified and included along with documentation that students perceive instruction to be of high quality and, where needed, improving (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1997). In addition, successes should be identified, marketed, and most importantly, celebrated. While most accomplishments in higher education focus on individual performance, successful organizations aggregate data at the departmental or unit level and focus
on both team and individual efforts. Most colleagues recognize that a healthy unit is committed to a culture of establishing goals, assessing progress, and continually striving to improve.

**Summary**

Within this paper, I have identified some of the factors affecting higher education. Clearly, institutions of higher education are facing challenging times, and substantive questions about higher education will likely continue to surface, including issues of cost, enrollment management, organizational structure, technology, productivity, and educational reform. The impact of change on kinesiology has already been felt. In the most severe cases, long-standing programs, some with excellent records, have been eliminated, restructured, or severely reduced in size. The outcomes have been dramatic, and many of our colleagues have questioned how to protect or safeguard against further erosion of kinesiology programs. While precisely identifying factors that might contribute to survival is difficult, this paper has attempted to provide some helpful suggestions. These include the obvious, such as the need for effective leadership, to the more subtle, such as the distinction between appropriate and unnecessary program duplication. While this paper provides some helpful information that can be generalized to various settings, context, along with peculiarities and idiosyncrasies specific to individual campuses and state systems, cannot be ignored.

**References**


