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Editor's Notebook: The Higher Ed Roller Coaster

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Editor’s Notebook
The Higher Ed Roller Coaster
by Michael Kryzanek

One of the benefits of being an “old-timer” here at Bridgewater State College is that I possess what is commonly called an institutional memory. Even though I have an occasional senior moment, I still have the capability to remember what the college looked like and how it operated over the last thirty years. As I reflect on my career as a faculty member, I have an unending supply of memories of students who were the first in their family to go to college and saw in this college the opportunity they needed to reach their dreams. Public colleges like Bridgewater are America’s great equalizers; they are the avenues of professional careers, personal fulfillment and social mobility for those of modest means. I am most proud to have been part of an educational experience that gave students the chance to follow that dream.

Also in my memory bank are the academic colleagues I have been associated with. As I look back I am simply amazed at how faculty at Bridgewater State have balanced teaching with research. Despite classroom demands that were double that of private college faculty, Bridgewater instructors have maintained their scholarly integrity writing books and professional papers, presenting artworks, theater productions and scientific studies and engaging in the widest range of community service, consulting and educational activities. From a standpoint of productivity, the Commonwealth has gotten more than its money’s worth from this faculty.

Finally, I remember how the administrative leaders of this college have taken this small teacher education normal school and transformed it into the largest, the most comprehensive and the most attractive state college in Massachusetts. Bridgewater today offers its students all they need to succeed in terms of programs, facilities, technology and of course a tradition of excellence. This has been no easy task for those entrusted with leading this college, but they have succeeded in building a real educational gem.

I must admit, however, that too much of my institutional memory is laced with a recurring vision of a higher education roller coaster. Bridgewater State is much like the lead car on a roller coaster chugging slowly up to the pinnacle of state support and then quickly descending into fiscal uncertainty. I remember always wondering why a state where public education was born would take its colleges and universities on such a wild and potentially destructive ride. Coming from the Midwest I never cease to be surprised at how the government officials in all those “less sophisticated” states are the biggest boosters of public higher education. They take personal ownership in building a strong college and university system because they know that the graduates of their institutions will contribute to making the state wealthier and more competitive. Here in Massachusetts, however, governors and key government officials spend too much of their energy passing budgets that seek to educate the youth of this state on the cheap and then criticize faculty and administrators for doing a substandard job with far less than they deserve. And when they aren’t trying to save money, they are working feverishly to reorganize higher education, most of the time with schemes that have a shelf life of a month or two.

Today in public higher education we are again at the top of the roller coaster and headed downward at a dizzying speed. After a few good years when the state was flush with money and in a generous mood, public colleges like Bridgewater State are facing another round of slash and burn with a reorganization thrown in for good measure. No matter that Massachusetts public higher education sits at the bottom of the ladder among the states in governmental appropriations. All that does matter is targeting higher education because someone new in the corner office has bought into the stereotype that private must be better than public.

After this latest blow to state colleges like Bridgewater it will be a slow and difficult climb up the roller coaster tracks, a journey that may take years. Too bad that a large chunk of my institutional memory has to be wasted on the constant push to remake the heart and soul of public higher education instead of concentrating on the thousands of student success stories, the contributions to scholarship of a productive faculty and the dedication of administrators to bring efficiency and vision to these great halls of learning. I never did like roller coasters.

—Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review