

Consultation in the Middle of a Storm – UC Continues Leading the Way

It is unfortunately true that the current financial climate has left us numb as we read headlines and stories about layoffs and furloughs in both the public and private sector. We read about companies and government agencies balancing their operating budgets by asking employees to sacrifice while at the same time continuing to expect the same level of work. The flood of these stories sometimes makes us forget about the individual impact of layoffs and furloughs on families across our state and our nation. Many of us have a family member or friend who is experiencing this impact if, in fact, we are not experiencing it directly ourselves.

But in this sea of news there is one important aspect that has been to-date underreported and underappreciated by the media – the unique consultative and far reaching approach that the University of California took when considering furloughs for its faculty and staff. This approach was not given to State employees or other institutions this year. However, even in the middle of a storm, UC was able to lead the way by creating a consultative process.

It is rare for a company or large state organization to seek input from their stakeholders when faced with a difficult situation. That is what makes the decision by President Yudof, to cast a wide net to capture input from a broad range of UC employees and stakeholders, so different and notable.

At first, many thought that this process was nothing more than window dressing to justify decisions that had already been made. But it is clear in the way in which the original furlough proposal was modified that the thoughtful input received was taken into account. In fact, the modified tiered furlough approach that was created out of this process was heralded by the Sacramento Bee as an approach “that other branches of state government should seriously consider” (Editorial, July 15, 2009).

Not only were scaled tiers taken in approaching the furloughs, but UC ensured that individual employee’s service credits and retirement were protected during this uncertain time. In addition, President Yudof provided a 30 day window for input between the original proposals and the adoption of the final version.

As with any new and innovative process, further refinement of the consultative process needs to take place. As noted by the Student Regents at the July UC Regents Meeting, students were left out of the consultative process and as one of the primary customers of the University; their perspectives have an appropriate place in these discussions. This especially makes sense when one considers the significant amount of time that students engage with faculty and staff. President Yudof acknowledged this point at that meeting – he clearly understood the importance of including the “entire family” in gaining input.

Establishing a consultative framework including faculty, staff, students and alumni is important to the UC system-wide decision-making process, and ensures that UC leadership and the Regents continue to gain a perspective from all stakeholders. The consultative process has already found another venue as the UC Commission on the Future begins its deliberations with members of all stakeholders at the table. As we imagine what could be considerable changes to UC's future, it is important that the University continue to embrace this new framework to ensure that the perspectives of faculty, staff, students, and alumni continue to be heard.

The State and other organizations that are battling this same storm could learn from this inclusive approach.

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