March 23, 2010

U. of California Panel Offers a Timid Response to Budget Crisis

U. of California

Mark G. Yudof, president of the U. of California, is co-chair of a commission developing ideas for the future of the system.

Enlarge Photo

By Josh Keller

San Francisco

The University of California is at a crossroads. Severe cuts in state support have led to sharply higher tuition, reduced enrollment, and a torrent of questions about the future of what has long been the nation's most prominent public-university system. Protests now roll through campuses in Berkeley and Los Angeles with the pomp and regularity of home football games.

In the face of crisis, university leaders assembled a 26-member panel, the University of California Commission on the Future, in July to suggest bold new ideas for how the university could reinvent itself. A co-chair of the commission and the chairman of the university's Board of Regents, Russell S. Gould, called for "nothing short of reimagining" the university.

But for all the soul-searching among protesters and administrators, the University of California has so far responded slowly, even timidly, to its worst budget cuts in modern history. Ideas to fundamentally alter how the system works have met many roadblocks, including divisions between faculty members and administrators and competing priorities among the system's 10 campuses.

Protesters have brought the university's struggles to national attention, but they have largely failed to coalesce around concrete

long-term ideas to handle diminished state funds. A proposal from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in January for a constitutional amendment that would shift billions of dollars from prisons to universities appears to be politically untenable.

And when committees from the Commission on the Future presented their initial proposals to respond to the crisis on Tuesday, it was clear the group's focus had narrowed. Far-reaching ideas, such as an expanded online program or major changes to tuition policy, were largely dropped. Logistical ideas dominated, aimed at helping the university scrape together enough money to escape its immediate budget crisis.

"I think you're going to be disappointed: There's not a whole lot there," said Daniel L. Simmons, vice chair of the university's systemwide Academic Senate and an ex-officio commission member, echoing what some members of the panel have been saying privately for months.

Mr. Simmons, who led the system's faculty senate almost two recessions ago, in 1994, said the group's ideas gave him "déjà vu" and did not appear to be much more than what was "batted around in the early 1990s."

The lack of consensus for how the University of California should move forward underscores the difficulties public universities everywhere are having envisioning a new future as state appropriations dry up. There are no easy solutions to sharp reductions in support, and the recession has strained relationships among students, faculty members, and administrators, muddying the messages colleges send to the public and making internal compromise an exceptionally arduous task.

Some outside observers faulted the University of California's reliance on a series of committees instead of more explicit direction from the system's president, Mark G. Yudof, who is the other co-chair of the commission. "The only thing that the university seems to be decisive about is making sure the commission is structured so nobody's ox is going to get gored," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a California-based nonprofit group.

'Change is Afoot'

But university leaders defended the commission's work, noting that it was important to involve all groups, especially the faculty, in discussions about the future of the university. The California system has an unusually influential faculty senate that traditionally holds final say over issues involving admissions and curriculum, making changes in those areas difficult without faculty assent.

Officials pointed to one proposal that aims to reap significant savings by ending duplicative administrative programs on individual campuses. Another critical proposal, they said, would begin a campaign to lobby federal agencies to improve the rate at which the university recovers reimbursements for overhead costs of research, which is low compared to similar institutions.

The system's interim provost and an ex-officio commission member, Lawrence H. Pitts, said the ideas the commission presented this month—which he called "admittedly bland"—were only a first step that would be supplemented by more-substantial recommendations in the months to come. Mr. Pitts said the commission would develop more expansive plans to respond to the budget crisis as panel members have more time to deliberate and receive feedback from regents, the Academic Senate, and the public.

In some respects the university's storied history makes people resistant to tinker with the existing model, even as the foundations of the model that has sustained the university since the 1960s are taken away, Mr. Pitts said.

"It's awfully easy to say, We've been good in the past; why would we change in the future?" Mr. Pitts said. A major challenge, he said, "is to get people to buy in that some kind of change is happening, whether we like it or not. With us or without us, change is afoot. So how do you take into account that reality and shape the future of the university?"

University leaders said they hope to use proposals from the Commission on the Future to improve what they acknowledge is a strained relationship with the public. In recent years, the university has been battered by weak leadership and a series of pay scandals, and it has long fought accusations that the system is a wasteful, slow-moving bureaucracy that needs to be reined in.

Student-led protests last fall against a 32-percent increase in undergraduate tuition gained extensive news-media attention, largely drowning out countereffforts by officials to promote the availability of financial aid for students. One impetus for the Commission on the Future was to show California lawmakers, who will soon decide how to close a new $20-billion budget deficit, that the university is responsive to the public's concerns.

"There's a political problem," said Christopher L. Kutz, chair of the Berkeley campus's Academic Senate. "In order to have credibility with the voters, we need to show that we're thinking seriously, that we know it's a problem."

A lack of consensus

But there is little consensus on what, exactly, should be done. At times, administrators and a majority of faculty members seem to have exactly opposite ideas about the direction of the university.

In July, Christopher Edley Jr., dean of the Berkeley law school and a commission member, proposed opening an 11th campus of the university entirely online, with the goals of increasing the number of seats available and generating revenue from online instruction. The idea was gingerly praised by Mr. Yudof, the president, who called Mr. Edley "my special adviser for radical causes."

But the idea quickly became a target for many faculty members, who believed online courses would never meet the university's standards of instructional quality. A few of them accused the university's leadership of trying to "dumb down" the university or turn it into the University of Phoenix.

Mr. Edley was appointed to be co-chairman of a committee on the Commission on the Future that considered expanding online instruction. But by a September meeting, he appeared frustrated with its progress. "Somebody's going to figure this out," he said. "We should be the ones to do it."

This week, as the commission's working groups released their initial set of proposals, the online campus idea was not mentioned. Instead, the commission proposed creating a small pilot program of up to 40 online undergraduate courses across the system that could be used as the basis for further study.

As Mr. Edley presented his committee's proposals on Tuesday, he warned the commission against conducting "business as usual" and said he believed the university's historical reliance on broad consensus was proving to be an impediment.

"We need some serious dental implants for this if we're going to make any progress," Mr. Edley said. "I don't know any significant organization that defines or achieves budgetary priorities from the bottom up, so that poses a challenge for a university that very much believes that academics have to be focused on and delivered from the bottom up. We're not there yet."

Other ideas, such as allowing more-selective campuses like Berkeley and Los Angeles to charge higher tuition than other campuses, have faced opposition, illustrating the inherent difficulties of finding consensus in a decentralized, multicampus system.

Unlike most public universities, the University of California requires that more-selective campuses charge the same levels of undergraduate tuition as less-selective campuses in Santa Cruz and Merced. Robert J. Birgeneau, Berkeley's chancellor, has publicly pushed the system to allow the most-competitive campuses to charge higher tuition, citing the extra money it would generate to help those campuses fill in cuts in state aid.

But people at less-selective campuses have denounced the idea, saying it would permanently relegate them to second-tier status and deny them a chance to become California's next great research universities.

"What the crisis has done is encourage the strong campuses to say, 'Oh, let's just all only eat what we kill, and UCLA is going to be fine,'" said Peter Krapp, an associate professor of film and media studies at the Irvine campus who has fought against differential tuition among campuses. "But if everybody else really suffers, UCLA is going to go down, too."

Peter J. Taylor, the university system's chief financial officer, said he

personally supported allowing campuses to charge their own levels of tuition. "We still want all of our campuses one day to be like Berkeley and UCLA, but they aren't right now, and it's OK to say that, I think," he said.

Mr. Taylor raised the possibility that the Commission on the Future would not find consensus on controversial issues, and the system's Board of Regents would act on some of them anyway. But he said some of the more-outlandish approaches, such as rapidly expanding online courses, have not moved forward because the university had chosen to continue to base its future on getting significant support from the State of California.

"It wasn't really throwing in the towel like, 'You know something? We're just going to have to do without the state and jack up tuition to $20,000,'" he said. "We chose consciously not to go that route."

But he acknowledged that the university's ambitions would depend on the state stepping up to support the university more than it now does.

"If they can't, then what do we do? Administrative efficiencies will only get you so far down the road," Mr. Taylor said. "Then you're faced with some very painful decisions. If you're going to remain the kind of institution you are, you need to look at differential fees; you need to look at online learning."

But is the university there yet?

"I don't think so," he said.