



Office of the President

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY 42101

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WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
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Mr. Harry M. Snyder, Executive Director
Council on Higher Education
Commonwealth of Kentucky
1050 U. S. 127 South
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601

Dear Harry:

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to your report on benchmark salaries and Western's relative good standing statistically. I am reminded of the untimely death of a gentleman who had just returned to Kentucky after a vacation in Florida where he acquired a great suntan. At his open casket all his friends kept remarking about how healthy he looked. I think these benchmark statistics may be nothing more than a suntan. To determine the true condition on our campuses, you have to check our vital signs.

As I give some examples to clarify our situation, I want to emphasize our gratitude for your help in trying to improve the situation. The state continues to face some major economic problems, and we expect to do what we can to help. In my opinion we are sliding into deeper trouble each year. Morale is growing worse as good people leave administration or teaching; our career employees are feeling neglected and unappreciated. Some even feel trapped by economic conditions which would make it nearly impossible for them to sell their homes if they leave Bowling Green. They are asking for a sign that someone cares as much as they are asking for money. Certainly all of us are grateful that we are not at the bottom of the benchmarks, but these data do not tell the campus story.

President Reinhardt has given you a good analysis of the problems we face. Let me add to his observations. First, average data for all ranks of faculty salaries compared with a median simply homogenizes the situation so much that the relevant problems are concealed. Furthermore, as President Reinhardt says, it is a strange world indeed if our only aspiration is to be average. At the present time Western is looking for quality administrators to head the following areas: Ogden College of Science, Technology, and Health; the Departments of Philosophy; Biology; Chemistry; Computer Science; the University Library; the Office of Dean of Student Affairs; and the Director of Alumni Affairs. We are also looking for some key faculty members. I seriously doubt that any of them will come from benchmark institutions if we get our first or second choices.

The first questions that candidates ask me if we make a job offer are: What will my salary be and what salary increase are you giving this year? In five and one-half years of recruiting for Western, no one has asked me how we compare with our benchmark institutions. For them and the managers of this university that is a meaningless statistic. In fact, it has been used more like a big club to strike us with and then tell us we ought to be

happy because in the opinion of the swinger we are well funded. As a manager, I have to talk about concrete rewards and not averages.

Second, most of the faculty we are hiring are in the high demand areas of computer science, engineering technology, marketing, accounting, and information systems. You simply will not convince them to come to Kentucky--any of our campuses--if you offer average salaries. The tragedy, of course, is that we continue to lose most of our good people in these areas after a year or two. I have and will continue to assert that our students deserve the right to receive quality instruction from modernly trained faculty. Unless we can attract and reward these faculty members, our students are likely to be shunned by major employers or become stunted in their careers because they lack the skills and information to compete against graduates from other states. I would like to see the day when corporations, businesses, schools, and other employers would beg for our students because they are so highly qualified. I am not aware of that happening regularly on any of our campuses, and it will not occur until we strengthen our academic programs.

The Council, the Legislature, and the public should know that a major corporation in Kentucky today sent representatives to Texas A & M to interview for twenty engineers to work in Kentucky. They may be interviewing in the state, but they obviously feel a need to go elsewhere. Why? I suspect it is because of the compromises that all of us have had to make in hiring and equipping our classrooms.

Third, the data you report is for 1983-84. Since it does not reflect the two percent increase for 1984-85, I am confident that even the suntan will fade when current data are used. I believe the Chronicle on Higher Education reported an average increase of 7 percent in salaries for public higher education last year. Even if to the faculty the benchmarks were meaningful, they would fail to show the current trend.

Fourth, by displaying the benchmarks so prominently, the Council on Higher Education staff seems to be saying these data are the true yardstick of financial conditions. The benchmarks in no way reflect the deferred maintenance on our buildings or the delay in making major equipment purchases or numerous other financial problems confronting us. Western has tried to avoid a totally depressing situation by placing a priority on salaries over buildings and equipment. What evidence is there that every other university is in a comparable situation? Some no doubt are delaying the repairs for buildings just as we are, but benchmark statistics do not tell the story. They must not be misused to claim that they do.

Finally, benchmark statistics are for faculty salaries only, but we are concerned about attracting and retaining quality administrative personnel and staff as well. In a modern university we need highly skilled personnel to handle complex student aid processing, modern personnel practices, and purchase and repair of equipment ranging from microcomputers to electrical transformers. The skilled professional is an important person in our operations, and so are our food service and physical plant personnel. They are

the ones who actually make it possible for the the rest of us to focus on carrying out the university's basic mission of teaching, research, and public service.

If the benchmark system is unacceptable as an indicator of the situation, what will work? Like any good university, we obviously aspire to become stronger which means developing our current personnel and hiring the best we can find for our present and future vacancies. One approach that might work is to aim at a cost-of-living index to determine the minimum increase needed for each campus. For some campuses that might leave them below the median of their benchmarks, but we could then ask for additional funds to raise them to this goal over a specific period. All of us have to aim for the top and then look for ways to get there.

Perhaps another way to state the argument is to ask what would we use to demonstrate our needs if we were all at our benchmarks? My hope would be that at a minimum we would try to match the cost-of-living increases. Even that goal leaves major funding problems in capital equipment and building maintenance. Unless we aspire to reach at least a salary level that keeps pace with inflation, we are clearly universities at risk in what we offer our students.

Let me emphasize that I am not holding others totally responsible for this problem. Clearly, higher education is dependent upon all branches of state government in finding a solution. We have to review our campus operations for relief from underfunding. That is why Western has adopted an optional retirement program for our faculty. We are experimenting to see if it will have some long-range benefits for the campus. We are willing to make similar changes that will help us solve some of the problems ourselves. Western had its best year ever in fund raising last year. Without those funds, numerous programs would have suffered more than they did.

People are still working hard. They care about students and want to continue their careers here. They realize that economic times are bad and that most of us are trying to help, but it would be a serious mistake to try to tell them that they ought to be grateful for how well they are living because of an average statistic from a questionable list of benchmark universities.

Sincerely,



Donald W. Zacharias
President

DWZ:mcb

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