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## UA's misguided 'landscape for earning'

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The university is supposed to be a center of learning, a special place in which ideas are exchanged, knowledge is passed on, and new generations prepare to face the future.

Unfortunately, in recent years the University of Akron has drifted further and further away from its core mission, as the percentage of its budget devoted to the academic side has declined in deference to profligate spending on administration and a dizzying array of building projects and "corporate synergies."

While the university clearly needed to upgrade the physical campus, for which President Luis Proenza and the board of trustees deserve credit, the problem is that they haven't recognized when it is time to stop. Our much-vaunted "landscape for learning" has become instead a "landscape for earning" that benefits a bloated administration and local contractors but no longer serves the best interests of the university.

Massive capital spending and indebtedness have undermined the university's financial position even as the percentage of revenues devoted to teaching and research has declined from 37 percent of the budget in 2004 to 34 percent in 2009. Students suffer the true cost of this unbridled spending, side by side with the faculty, whose mission it is to teach them.

The data show unequivocally that administrative positions and the salaries of these bureaucrats have soared in recent years. Student tuition and fees, which comprised 32 percent of UA revenues in 2002, now make up 43 percent. Salaries of associate and full professors at UA rank 10th and 11th out of the 12 state-supported institutions in Ohio.

In these challenging economic times, with workers facing layoffs and wage cuts, it may be difficult for some to sympathize with college professors. We are often wrongly perceived as having cushy jobs and guaranteed lifetime employment, neither of which is true. Such perceptions obscure the dedication, hard work and commitment to teaching, research and community service that UA faculty display.

It is critical to understand that universities operate within a labor market. The absence of competitive salaries and benefits means that UA will continue to lose academic talent to other institutions.

The ongoing drain of accomplished researchers and stimulating teachers victimizes students, impoverishes our community and damages the morale of those who remain loyal to the university.

President Proenza himself recently acknowledged that the time has come for the University of Akron to invest more in its badly neglected human capital. Yet, he made much the same pronouncement some seven years ago, when the faculty showed interest in union organization, and faculty and staff have become even worse off in the interim.

These concerns apply not only to the 717 faculty members but also to some 1,900 additional workers and staff, without whom the university could not function. This is the human capital that is being left behind while the university pays two football coaches and two chief financial officers, though only one is actually working in each case.

At the same time, the UA administration seems unable to resist contracting for any proposed building project. It has also spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on corporate search firms it could easily do without.

The University of Akron is a public institution and it ought to be governed responsibly and for the public interest rather than the private interest. A state university should not be managed in the style of AIG or Lehman Brothers, where those at the top reward themselves while the financial structure collapses around them to the detriment of employees and the community.

We at Akron-AAUP are currently enmeshed in troubled contract talks with the UA administration, but we are not just negotiating out of self-interest. We believe the stakes are much higher — we are trying to preserve the core mission of our university.

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