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A catch-22 for Illinois higher ed

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
Letters from Academia

faculty, was leading its administration to hire instructors who would work for free. In an email to department chairs, Michael R. Molino, associate dean for research, budget, and personnel, asked for help in finding alumni with terminal degrees who would apply “to join the SIU Graduate Faculty in a zero-time (adjunct) status.” The alumni who accepted the three-year positions might serve on graduate students’ thesis committees, teach graduate or undergraduate lectures, or collaborate on research projects,” according to Molino’s email.

Then there’s the case of Mani Pavuluri, a child psychiatrist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who founded a renowned clinic to treat children with bipolar disorder and secured millions of dollars in federal money. She has been accused of putting children from around the country at serious risk by violating research rules by testing the powerful drug lithium on children younger than 13 despite having been told not to do so. She has been faulted of failing to properly alert parents of the study’s risks and of falsifying data to cover up the misconduct.

Finally, according to University of Illinois officials at Urbana, there has been a rise in reported sexual misconduct cases. The university’s Office of Diversity, Equity and Access said a couple of weeks ago that it had handled about 50 sexual conduct cases involving faculty, staff or student employees in both 2016 and 2017. That’s an increase from 30 cases in 2015 and 26 cases in 2014. The cases included sexual or gender-based harassment, dating violence, stalking and sexual assault, and this number does not include complaints made by students against other students, which are handled by the campus Title IX office.

All these scandals are severely hurting public universities that, because of lack of financial support from the state, have become more and more dependent on tuition money to survive. And the fact that there has been a decrease in the number of high school graduates, and that many of them are migrating to other states to pursue a higher education, is only making things even worse.

As a consequence, administrators at some Illinois public colleges and universities are taking extreme measures that,

far from solving their problems, are actually making them worse. For example, for the fourth straight year, the University of Illinois system has frozen tuition for in-state students at its three campuses. The purpose of such a measure is to stop the bleeding of Illinois residents enrolling at out-of-state colleges and universities. It is not working. In 2016 alone, the state experienced an overall net loss of 19,195 students, a 15-percent increase from 2014’s 16,000-student gap.

These Illinois institutions have tried other things such as furloughs, layoffs, or admitting students from other states and even countries at a discount rate. In other words, the citizens of Illinois are subsidizing with their taxes students who are not state residents and, therefore, do not pay state taxes. This is another perfect example of a Catch-22 situation.

One of the major reasons behind the exodus of Illinois students to other states has been the political impasse that began in 2015 between the state’s Republican governor, Bruce Rauner, and the Democratic-controlled legislature, which has led to a severe underfunding of the state’s higher education system. The resulting financial uncertainty has created a lot of anxiety among students and their parents who cannot count on the state’s colleges and uni-

versity on surviving in the foreseeable future.

Although the hemorrhaging of students to other states was already happening before the 2015 election of Rauner, under his administration it has become even worse. Rauner, whose net worth is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars, ran for governor on a platform of rolling back state taxes that had been put in place by his predecessor, Pat Quinn.

Thus, the economic situation of the state has become dire, and since for many politicians public education does not provide partisan gains, higher education in the Land of Lincoln has become a victim.

When you combine the underfunding with the scandals, the future of public higher education in the state seems quite shaky. And many people forget that the weakening of the education system makes things ever shakier. Not only do public universities have a direct economic impact on their communities, but also are supposed to be the cradle of the educated workforce that is essential for economic progress.

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The 1951 novel “Catch-22” by Joseph Heller describes its own title as a situation from which you cannot escape because of contradictory rules, such as “How am I supposed to gain experience to get a job if I’m constantly turned down for not having any experience?” The troubles for public higher education in Illinois, which have attracted much national attention, seem to be a clear example of a Catch-22 situation. And it seems that the last few weeks have been nothing but full of bad news for Illinois higher ed.

First, we have the case reported by “The Daily Egyptian,” the student newspaper at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, that the daughter and son-in-law of Carlo D. Montemagno, the school’s chancellor since August of last year, had been hired into positions created for them. Melissa Germain, Montemagno’s daughter, was hired as an assistant director of university communications, earning an annual salary of \$52,000. Her husband, Jeffrey Germain, makes \$45 an hour as a senior research coordinator. And all this is happening at a university in serious financial distress, and in a state where higher education has been severely underfunded.

This dire financial situation may be behind a move that, according to the Carbondale