New president of UH must help define its mission and values

By David Duffy

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The Honolulu Star-Advertiser has laid out what it sees as the tasks ahead for the next University of Hawaii president: Increase community support, tackle the maintenance backlog and strengthen education and research to further economic development.

However, there are critical internal issues the new president will have to address, if UH is to satisfy these external expectations and become the university our state needs.

The new president will have to create a greater attitude of trust and responsibility, support bottom-up initiatives and, most important, help define the mission and values of the university system.

All good universities are meritocracies in intent, if not always in execution. UH, like our island culture, runs too often on whom you know, not whether you are up for the task. Past presidents have aggravated this tendency by picking favorites based on their prejudices or agendas, rather than on competence or performance. Neither good teaching nor innovative research can emerge from this approach as it emanates from the fabric of the university.

To be a meritocracy, the "currency" of the university must be articulated, debated and accepted by consensus: What do we value? Currencies usually flow from a sense of mission. Currencies may include research prestige and impact, research dollars generated, education quality, number of students taught, neighborhood support, economic impact or sports success.
Not all currencies are necessarily healthy, like winning football seasons, but if they are explicit, they can be discussed. UH truly doesn't know what its mission is; it still wants to be all things to all people.

UH administrators need to rid themselves of the bureaucratic "cover your butt" mentality that feeds off pro-forma accountability. The administration wastes millions on these internal pre-audits, then misses blunders like Stevie Wonder concerts or UH-West Oahu construction overruns.

Individuals should be assigned to monitor an entire financial transaction, rather than have a dozen people sign off who haven't the time to check what is going on. Accountability should not be defined as a bureaucratic way to spread risk and blame.

The university administration must overcome its perceived indifference to its workforce. The administration doesn't trust its faculty and doesn't often acknowledge or reward their achievements, despite a provision in the union contract that allows them to award special salary bonuses based on meritorious performance.

What is the "UH approach" for motivating the workforce, be they faculty, technical APTs, secretaries or janitors?

Great universities are risk takers, highly entrepreneurial in how they support and structure great research and great teaching. With risk comes failure, but the institution's response to failure is critical. If you punish failure, the best you can hope for is mediocrity.

However, if you learn from the failure and encourage your workforce to persist, then the rewards of success will follow.

The next president needs to adopt the approach of a great university, by embracing risk, failure and reward as part of a complete package.

A good second-rate university or business can be top down with everyone taking instructions from management, but there is no way for such an institution to "administer" itself to greatness. Innovations rarely come down from on high; instead, new ideas and knowledge bubble up from those actively engaged in teaching and research.

In contrast, administrators tend to hang out at national conferences, sharing ideas for new programs that are rarely novel or attuned to local institutions and their communities. And, too often, the take-home innovations focus on form, not substance.

So a new president will have to craft a consensus on UH's mission and values and change the culture to reward successful risk-taking and excellence while ensuring true accountability, not a paper-passing facade.

The candidate who can accomplish this task will deserve the support of the faculty and staff, in addition to the personal financial rewards that come with the job.

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