An Open Letter to Faculty and Staff in the University System of Georgia on Health Care

Growing concern has been expressed by faculty and staff in the University System of Georgia regarding the proposed changes in health care coverage contained in the Benefits Update dated March 10, 2010. These concerns are justified.

A number of these proposals reflect a failure to understand the university. They reflect a confusion of “a business” with “a university.” In brief, the underlying assumption is that faculty are cheap labor, easily replaceable. If faculty do not like the cuts on their benefits and wages, get rid of them and replace them with more manageable sorts. Second, the university’s primary goal, in this model, is to maximize profit through an attack on its “labor costs”; thus the desire to “solve” the financial problems confronting higher education in Georgia on the backs of faculty and staff. This belief that wage cuts (furloughs), reductions in the state share of health care costs, increased instructional demands without corresponding increases in hires (“do more for less”), and a refusal to address the crisis in the Optional Retirement Plan through permitting faculty and staff buy-back into TRS, is shared from the top of state government on down.

Higher education is not a business. If one does not comprehend this fact, then that person cannot but fail to do his duty to protect education. The university’s primary function is not to maximize profit. Faculty are not “costs” to be “controlled.” Faculty and the supporting staff are the heart of the educational enterprise. They and the students they teach are the “products” of the university, products that are threatened by the current drive for the managerialization, the Enronization, of the university. Rather than seeing the university as the place where ideas are contested, where “truths” are challenged, and above all else citizens, not subjects, are created (for citizenship is a learned social responsibility whereas subjection is a condition of servitude), far too many at the Board, and most unfortunately even some of the presidents and provosts of our universities and colleges, seek to transform the university into a handmaiden for business and industry and the temporary ruling political elite, whose primary interest is to increase profits and power.

The present assault on wages and benefits is at its heart an attack on the democratic purpose of the university—the recreation every generation of critical citizens empowered by the force of the mind to protect and expand the gains of democracy.

Looking at the past several years in Georgia, we cannot be blind to the forces that threaten the gains of higher education in Georgia: the efforts to introduce in the legislature the so-called “Academic Bill of Rights”; the creation of a “tenure-free” new unit in the University System; the unrestrained growth in the employment of faculty off tenure; the use of post-tenure review by some administrators as a means to punish “uncooperative” faculty; the cancellation of campus talks by “radicals” to keep the ruling elite happy; the determination of policies, including recently the imposition of furloughs, without appropriate faculty involvement.

Can higher education in Georgia be saved from this myopia? I do not know. But I do know that unless we are willing to join battle together, we are left with but individual and group impotence. At this stage the only group capable of stopping the continued attack on wages and benefits are the university presidents. Some are aware; others need your help to do their duty. Give that aid.