

Case14.

The term "urban university" has many meanings, and varies depending on context. In the academy, broadly, urban universities are institutions of higher education located in socially and economically diverse communities of more than one-quarter-million. An important mission of these schools is to serve their communities by raising the level of educational attainment within them, especially for traditionally underserved populations. To do this, most urban universities include graduate and professional schools, some of which grant a terminal degree and adopt lower admission standards to increase access and opportunity.

At a large urban Midwestern university, the faculty of the Master of Urban Planning Program (MUP) long ago adopted a 2.50 grade point average (GPA) as a minimum admission standard. The Department of Urban Planning frequently admits students with lower GPAs who otherwise demonstrate potential for success in the graduate program, on the condition that they achieve at least a "B" average in their prescribed classes during the first semester of the program. By rule, failure to meet this conditional standard precludes students from further pursuing a MUP degree at the institution.

In recent years, the department chair refused to dismiss students who did not achieve the grade point upon which their continuation in the MUP program hinged. The chair also routinely made exceptions for students who were admitted without conditions to continue their studies indefinitely when their academic record fell below the standards set by the graduate school. When challenged by colleagues and university administrators, the chair defended the actions as necessary to advance the institution's urban mission by providing disadvantaged students with every chance to realize their academic goals. "This is especially important," the chair argued, "since the state is experiencing its most dramatic economic downturn in more than 50 years."

Quietly, other faculty in the department raised concerns about the chair's practice of retaining unqualified students. They contended that the students in question are unlikely ever to graduate from the program, even with the remedial help provided by professors. Students commonly repeat classes without appreciably improving their grade. Furthermore, a significant number of students who are failing in the program cannot be considered disadvantaged.

"It is particularly troubling," offered a junior faculty member, "to continue to accept tuition from students who have little chance to succeed in the program. The Department is not providing opportunity: it is acting opportunistically. This is especially disturbing because many of the under-performing MUP students are considerably older and the opportunity cost for them to remain in the program is likely very steep. "

As the State continues to cut direct aid for higher education, the university finds itself hemorrhaging financially. Increases in tuition are only likely to help the university reduce its budget deficit as long as enrollment remains steady or increases. In response to

continuing cuts, the administration has gradually begun to adjust its system of incentives to reward matriculation and retention numbers rather than graduation rates. As long as enrollment in the MUP program continues to grow steadily, the administration seems willing to accept the chair's rationale concerning retention of under-performing students. Following such a path has allowed the administration to spare the MUP program from funding cuts and improve the university's bottom line. "After all", the Provost commented, "there would be no urban mission without a financially healthy University to promote it."