why the prioritization of profit is our loss

by leilacrzyvani

Here's a fun experiment to try next time you're talking to your favorite professor: mention the acronym "IBB" and see how they react. Shudders of disgust? Frustration at prioritization? Concerned furrowing of the brow?

So what is this thing? IBB stands for Incentive-Based Budgeting, a financial model for the University that was developed between 2014 and 2015 and is now fully implemented at UVM. IBB breaks UVM into Cost Centers and Responsibility Centers. Colleges like CAS and CALS are "Responsibility Centers," generating revenue. "Cost Centers," such as Admissions, do not earn money directly, but provide supporting services.

Basically, our tuition dollars are allocated to UVM's schools based on credit hours and declared majors. In addition, the deans are given most of the power in financial decision-making for their schools; they are expected to be consultative with their faculty, but it is not required by the IBB algorithm itself. This level of collaboration and communication varies from dean to dean and school to school. According to the IBB Final Report, all of this creates "an incentive to offer innovative, high-quality undergraduate programs; respond to student needs and demands; and to focus on student recruitment and retention." IBB is also intended to increase "transparency, clarity and predictability" in the budgeting process and support interdisciplinary scholarship and collaboration.

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I talked to Associate Professor Felicia Kornbluh and ENVS Lecturer Dan Wells (president and community representative, respectively, of United Academics - UVM's faculty union) to find out more. They were cautious about sharing their findings because the budget model is new; they want a solid foundation before any claims can be made. But some things can be said with confidence, and here's what I learned:

IBB was not requested by faculty, and the process of design and implementation was not democratic. Members of the administration suggest that IBB was a product of faculty demand. But Kornbluh made it clear that the demand came from the administration, and the planning process was dominated by "top level" administrators. A seat at the table doesn't mean a voice at the table.

IBB has resulted in a decrease in the number of part-time faculty. Some departments - like CADE, Nursing, or Environmental Studies - rely on part-time faculty to teach special topics or field courses. These people are specialists with valuable experience to share. But schools and departments are feeling the pressure build as IBB pushes them to be "efficient" (make cuts), and those lecturers are often the first to feel the sting.

IBB is not a value-neutral algorithm. As Wells puts it, "there's no face on the algorithm, but someone had to write it."

The administration decides what has value and what doesn't. Departments are allocated funds based on credit hours taught - how many students enroll in a course. But those credit hours, and thus funds, are decided if the faculty member teaches in the Honors College. Why only the Honors College? It's because HCOL attracts a certain customer that the administration has made a priority (based on potential revenue): upper middle class students and parents. The Honors College also raises the University's rankings in US News and World Report.

By saying students are our customers instead of our partners in learning, it's creating a different relationship... that is transactional and commercial.
"We're narrowing the courses that are offered... especially small, quirky or unusual courses. You have a system that charges per faculty member, and pays back per student. What's the incentive there?"

In essence, the IBB is just the latest step in the deepening process of corporatization at UVU and universities nationwide. UVU is attempting to step away from the "groovy" image and re-brand as a top-tier public research institution. The result is a bidding model that prioritizes high-return departments like STEM and Business while marginalizing the humanities and areas of study that are often deeply critical of the powers-that-be (like Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies). We should really question whether the administration does in fact hold our learning (in whatever subjects we choose) as its highest priority.

I want my students to realize the importance of critical thinking, collaboration and challenging the status quo. They are not outposts of the (often irrational) capitalist "free" market system. As Wells puts it, "IBB makes every decision into a financial decision." And this isn't just a philosophical problem - UVU is a non-profit under Utah Tax Code, given that designation because it is an education, not profit.

What can we do? First, we have to support our lecturers, tenured professors, adjuncts and other faculty. The alternating nature of higher education is not their fault; it's the fault of our administrators and their attempts to turn UVU into a factory. If our teachers are constantly worrying about their balance sheets, worrying about the number of balls in a heat, their quality of life and teaching will diminish. And we must remember the staff, perhaps the least appreciated and recognized workers on campus. How does IBB impact their ability to make a living and lead fulfilling lives?

We should reject this kind of shit. We should build power and connect with students at other universities and colleges to form networks against a system that does not serve us. We should build spaces of learning outside the school in our living rooms and online, in coffee shops, public libraries, the woods, the tops of mountains and on the streets of the late.