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On the Art of University Pruning

The present financial drought and the resulting need to cut back the activities of many universities *could* serve to saw off deadwood and to enhance the vitality, indeed quality, of the main plant in preparation, one would hope, for a new period of growth. As fond as one may be of rapid branching out and abundant blossoming, one must admit that the spring of the 1950's and 1960's fostered some rather wild, often unplanned offshoots, occasionally of poor quality. A pause in growth, if it does not last too long and does not cut too deep, could provide the needed time and incentive for review, for selective cutbacks, for consolidation, and for planning of future growth.

Unfortunately, most universities show little evidence of having mastered the difficult art of selective university pruning. Across-the-board cutbacks (for instance, budgets lower by 5 percent for all departments and schools), or a university-wide "freeze" on hiring or on raises, are the common pattern. Typically, a recent intrauniversity memo reads: "There has been considerable variability among the several schools of the University in increases in faculty salaries in relatively recent years. Obviously equity requires that those schools in which recent salary increases have been small be offered a larger option of increasing salaries than schools with the reverse history." Equity among divisions whose relevance to the university's main missions varies a great deal is the opposite of selective pruning.

Here and there half-hearted attempts at selective pruning are made; the budget of some divisions is not reduced, while everybody else is forced to give up 5 percent. However, only a few universities choose to *close* some divisions, which are not essential to their enterprise, and to *increase* the budget of others—or to rank their departments, promoting the fields in which the university may make a major contribution and achieve distinction, and neglecting the departments that seem unpromising or "hopeless."

Since pruning requires so much more leadership from university presidents, and an ability to mobilize consensus from the university community than across-the-board cuts, one ought not to be surprised that pruning is rarely practiced, but that it is practiced at all. Many universities now hit financially are just outgrowing a different sort of crisis, that of radical confrontations. The last crisis left in its wake a strong preference for "political" university presidents, who can deal with radical students, liberal faculties, and conservative trustees, with one goal in mind—to keep the university open without turning it into a garrison state. The president's highly "political" style seems to be particularly ill-suited for the strong leadership that pruning requires. In many universities, therefore, it is the faculties and the trustees who must find it in their hearts to demand that the pruning knife be wielded not with an eye to keeping everyone equally happy (or, more precisely, equally unhappy) but with an eye to the shaping of a greater university. —AMITAI ETZIONI, *Chairman, Department of Sociology at Columbia University, and Director, Center for Policy Research*