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Husted's model is in his back yard

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House Speaker Jon Husted is convinced that Ohio's higher education community isn't interested in innovation.

Yet, he need drive only about 15 minutes north from his capitol office to find a university leader brimming with new ideas: Ohio State University Provost Barbara Snyder.

Even as Husted, a Dayton-area Republican, last month railed against the state's campus officials for yet again sticking to the status quo in a budget allocation, Snyder wrapped up an impressive academic contest involving \$50 million and a select few campus research projects.

Targeted Investments in Excellence, as Snyder calls the program, required faculty to compete against one another for slices of a \$50 million pie. The provost received 52 proposals and gave money to just 10; she even prioritized among the winners, with allocations ranging from less than \$500,000 to more than \$11 million.

Yes, every academic discipline is important, Snyder says, but "some are more important in driving the university's academic stature."

Such blunt talk practically amounts to blasphemy on university campuses, where protocol demands that all scholars receive equal respect, regardless of specialty. Corporations and outside agencies create distinctions in grant awards, but academe is supposed to be above such crass concerns.

Yet, if public universities hope to thrive in an era of shrinking funding, their leaders must turn a bit more pragmatic. Broadening the mind isn't mission enough; politicians and parents expect concrete returns on their investments.

Consider Speaker Husted's recent comment: "The state must focus its higher education resources directly on . . . disciplines that drive our economy - science, technology, engineering and math."

The remarks came as part of the speaker's rebuke to higher education leaders who'd chosen to divvy up a \$30 million legislative bonus among all state institutions. By refusing to focus spending on crucial state needs, Husted charged, the officials proved "they will not make the necessary changes to revitalize Ohio's economy."

Yet look at the list of Snyder's winning proposals, and it's obvious that at least one Ohio institution understands the importance of real-world impacts. Nine of 10 relate to science, engineering or medicine (the 10th creates a music industry program - that is, one that aims to prepare artists for the business, technological and legal aspects of their craft).

The largest grant recipient, titled "Climate, Water and Carbon," capitalizes on Ohio State's internationally renowned research on global warming; another focuses on public health preparedness. Every approved program involves multiple university departments, and most have potential to reap significantly more outside dollars by virtue of the strength of the collaborations.

"Problems aren't solved by individual disciplines anymore," Snyder explained.

OSU launched a "selective investment" program in the late 1990s, but its awards and expectations both were far smaller. In addition to its robust fiscal support, Snyder's model also included ingenious rules: departments had to invest large amounts of their own dollars to be eligible for additional TIE funds; departments had to commit to complete the proposed initiative whether or not they received TIE money; and all proposals are expected to become self-sustaining within a few years (those not chosen get slightly more lenient timelines).

In other words, Snyder's approach is designed to bring maximum return on OSU's original investment.

Husted was right to attack the business-as-usual approach reflected in the way university officials allocated the General Assembly's extra \$30 million. But he should look closely at the campus down the street before assuming the entire system is devoid of original thinkers. The provost's TIE program speaks precisely to Husted's priorities; as the speaker looks to reform higher education statewide, Snyder is someone he should approach for ideas.

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