Administrative malfeasance is wounding the UH we all love
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POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, May 28, 2015 Thursday Star Advertiser
LAST UPDATED: 02:05 a.m. HST, May 28, 2015

On May 7, the Star-Advertiser’s top headline read, "Tuition increase seen as a solution."

Days later, reports emerged of longstanding accusations of bullying, sexism and racism against the University of Hawaii-Manoa’s Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (VCAA), Reed Dasenbrock.

These stories are not unrelated. Over the past 15 to 20 years, UH-Manoa has labored under an increasingly heavy layer of administration, even as programs are slashed and faculty numbers dwindle due to non-replacement of those who resign or retire.

It’s worth asking what all this administration accomplishes.

Take Dasenbrock’s position -- $285,000 annually, far in excess of most UH employees -- which he has held for six years. The VCAA job description makes Dasenbrock responsible "for promoting the University’s commitment to diversity, equity, and cultural values" and for "judiciously balanc[ing] the best interests of academic affairs with those of the campus, system, and community"; and "exercis[ing] seasoned judgment in determining the means, methods, and resources necessary to achieve academic goals and objectives." Finally, the VCAA must have "the ability to establish effective working relationships with a variety of personnel."

Vice Chancellor Dasenbrock has not acted "judiciously" or with "seasoned judgment" in his dealings with many UHM personnel. Rather than supporting faculty efforts to fulfill the primary mission of the university (i.e., educating students), Dasenbrock has made this work more difficult. He has cut programs like Study Abroad (with its "commitment to diversity" and emphasis on expanding horizons for underrepresented local students) nearly past repair, and required some programs to lower their standards to the detriment of local students’ graduate school plans. The university’s upper echelons are less diverse than when he arrived; only two of the deans of color hired by previous chancellors remain and none of the six Asian or "local" deans were retained by Dasenbrock.

Dasenbrock has argued against competitive salaries for local people, because "of course they want to be here." He has bullied senior faculty and others in public. At an institution already suffering low morale after years of draconian cuts, such behavior makes matters worse.

We are committed senior faculty -- because of tenure our jobs are relatively secure -- who organized last summer after administrative overreach became painfully clear

in the firing of UH-Manoa Chancellor Tom Apple. Hawai‘i taxpayers and others paying UH-Manoa tuition need to know the extent to which administrative malfeasance is wounding the university we love and support. So long as such actions occur at the top of the UH hierarchy, supported by administrators who fail to correct it, taxpayers and other stakeholders must continue to scrutinize how state and tuition dollars are being spent.

We need forward-looking leadership. Just the other week, the head of our Faculty Senate Committee on Administration and Budget, a local Japanese-American woman, was speaking from the podium about her committee's concerns about the administration's Budget Task Force effort to "fix" the UH-
Manoa budget crisis. Dasenbrock stood up and began shouting over her, even though he had just spoken. He was called out of order, but continued to interrupt her. Others in the room repeatedly protested, "You are out of order, sit down!" before the Senate chair finally got him to stop interrupting.

This type of aggressive, bullying behavior has become commonplace for those who must interact with Dasenbrock.

UH President David Lassner and UH-Manoa Chancellor Robert Bley-Vroman have been asked to address the Dasenbrock problem. We are waiting to see whether this request is being taken seriously.

Those of us who love UH must demand that our flagship campus make the education of students a higher priority than supporting administrative bullying and mismanagement of taxpayer resources.

Kameʻeleihiwa and Rai submitted this commentary on behalf of 11 other faculty and staff members (see list with this column online at staradvertiser.com).

Editor's note: Reed Dasenbrock has denied the allegations, saying in a May 15 statement: "I'm confident that the investigation will show that these charges have no foundation." A UH spokesman says the investigation is ongoing and the process should be allowed to proceed without taint.

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