NO ANALOGY NEEDED: IT’S TIME FOR CHANGE

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I am a fan of analogies. Good analogies help bridge gaps in understanding. They make a point and tell a story.

Unfortunately, some analogies can be more harmful than helpful. I learned this hard lesson when trying to make a point at a recent meeting of our board of trustees.

I was attempting to say that after years of budget challenges, Southern Illinois University Carbondale is no longer perceived as distinctive by those looking at us from the outside because we had cut many of the things that called attention to our strengths. Unfortunately, by comparing our past and present reputations using car models, I missed the mark and angered those who take pride in a great institution.

They are right to be angry. I am very sorry.

Some might wonder why I needed to make the point at all. Am I damaging SIU by talking about the issues that put us on the path we must take to take to reclaim our distinctiveness? This question is similar to one all Illinois public universities struggled with during the recent state budget impasse. As institutions made the case for funding with legislators, they had to tell stories that did not serve them well in other corners.

It’s a difficult balancing act to ensure that people understand the urgent need for action at the same time we want them to be part of our academic community. Every one of us must work harder to make sure that our internal debates do not do collateral damage to our external reputation. I pledge to continue to work hard to advance our global reputation.

Those of us inside of SIU know that it is a special place. We know that we change lives every day through determination and hard work. We know that our students benefit from faculty members who lead their fields, from staff members who care, and from experiences inside and outside of the classroom that lay the foundation for future success.

But our light is hidden to the outside world because we do not stand out in a crowd of institutions that look very much like us. By reorganizing and redefining our academic programs, we will create new energy and excitement both within and outside of our university. By addressing internal inefficiencies, we can create resources to reinvest in our programs and people.
By reclaiming our distinctiveness as a national research university -- one that is committed to access and opportunity, that develops the entire student and focuses on research that matters -- we will attract the attention of students looking for a unique, challenging and fun college experience.

I don't need an analogy to say that we have no time to waste. We have spent too many years not acting on plans that gather dust. It's time to show the world that we can adapt to meet the changing needs of new generations.

It's time.