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Community is extra important in tight financial times

*By Bobby Fong
President, Butler University*

Don't spend money you don't have. My mother's old adage was probably the best economic lesson of my life. And I put this policy into practice when I came to Butler University in 2001 - setting out to restore fiscal equilibrium at a school that ran budget deficits for more than a decade.

While belt-tightening efforts included salary freezes and a cap on operating expenses, I told the campus community we wouldn't cut jobs. That wasn't simply a budgetary calculation. I believe people who work in an organization, particularly a university, are part of a community. It's important in hard times to have the community members feel supported. And if we're serious about caring for our employees, we have to stick with them through good times and bad.

We were able to weather the crisis. But I still remember two things from that time that underline the importance of community. That first holiday season, we decided to continue the tradition of a holiday party. Previously, it was a cocktail party in the gym. I decided to hold the party at The Children's Museum. Not only did I want employees, spouses and partners to come, but I wanted to make sure their kids were invited. Over the years, the event has grown from about 900 people to 1,400.

I was asked why, in the middle of a budgetary crisis, we were spending money on a party at all. I said, "You don't just celebrate and give thanks when everything's right. You need to be aware of your blessings and your identity as a community in the midst of challenges too. You don't stop having birthday parties for your kids because times are hard. In fact, what you can scrape together during those years may be the most memorable celebrations."

People understood that, in their own families, they didn't stop celebrating. And, if Butler was going to be a family, we ought to live by that same standard. The reaction from our community affirmed my decision.

During my first year at Butler, we instituted a total salary freeze. The second year, we gave employees a three percent raise on the first \$20,000 of salary. That's when the second bright moment occurred. A number of people from our campus community came back to me and asked that their three percent be turned back into the common pool so a little more could be distributed to the people earning less than \$20,000. That was an important statement: People said, "We need to watch out for one another - not just ourselves and our own families."

Those were meaningful gestures of community. Butler is now built on a larger sense that we are a community. We have to make tough decisions as an organization. But it's possible to be humane and supportive at the same time.

Dr. Bobby Fong became Butler University's 20th president in 2001. The first American-born child of Chinese immigrants, Fong grew up in Chinatown in Oakland, Calif. He worked as dean of the faculty and professor of English at Hamilton College, in Clinton, N.Y. before coming to Butler. Fong, an avid baseball fan and card collector, is married and has two sons.

Email Dr. Fong your thoughts on his Leadership Lesson Learned at mallan@butler.edu.

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