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Call their bluff

By Colin McNickle

It's extortion by any other name, this threat from the chieftains of Pennsylvania's four "state-related universities" to -- GASP! -- privatize their operations if state subsidies are slashed for the second year in a row.

But they should be a lot more careful about how many sabers they rattle and how vociferously they rattle them. For these recidivist, out-of-touch spendthrifts might just find themselves out of business.

If forced to privatize because of shriveling taxpayer teats, they soberly warn that tuition will escalate, in-state student discounts will disappear and the number of graduate programs will decline. It's not claimed that we'll all be toothless, shoeless, preppers and beggars, but, hey, give 'em time, class, give 'em time.

Penn State's Rodney Erickson warns of a \$1,400 tuition hike.

Lincoln University's Robert Jennings says the tab at the Philadelphia school would rise by \$1,350. (Never mind that Gov. Tom Corbett's budget proposal doesn't cut any money for Lincoln. Whoops! Busted!)

Over at Temple, Ann Weaver Hart predicts an increase of \$4,000 a year. (Are we to assume that a few cases of a premium wine are included?)

Mark Nordenberg doesn't appear to be putting a number on any projected tuition hike at Pitt. But during hearings last week in Harrisburg, he and his brethren used the opportunity to push back against demands for increased transparency.

"If we ain't gettin' nuttin', you ain't gettin' nuttin'," he might as well have said.

Oh, and never mind, too, the ample scholarly literature that debunks the correlation between public subsidy cuts and higher tuition rates. And never mind, also, the ample scholarly literature that proves how subsidies actually give all kinds of cover to raise tuition rates.

Now, all this said, these esteemed learneds of the academy might want to brush up on just how to actually practice public-purse extortion.

For you see, if these institutions of higher learning follow through on their threat to privatize, they're going to face a competitive education marketplace* in which consumers will tap the magic of markets* to drive tuition rates down.* (*Gasp! *Gasp! *Gasp!)

More than a few ivory towers could face dismantling.

And as for those who argue that reduced state subsidies will "price out" deserving prospective students of lesser means from receiving a college education, a few facts, courtesy of the **Cato Institute**:

Taxpayer subsidies that have given colleges and universities cover to raise tuition without check have led to too many unprepared students seeking higher educations. Standards have fallen. The need for remedial work has risen. The share of entering students who complete degrees has fallen. And the six-year graduation rate for bachelor's students is only about 56 percent.

That's not exactly of Bluto Blutarsky caliber (think "Animal House") but it's not far off, either.

The Pennsylvania Legislature should call the state-related universities' bluff. Pitt, Penn State, Temple and Lincoln should privatize. The cost-to-benefit calculation will return to equation. And students, higher education and taxpayers will be better for it.