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Our University – Adjacencies

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Our University – Adjacencies

Adjacencies in architecture are those relationships between the various parts of building that are critical to its success. For example, the living and dining rooms in typical home design have a high degree of adjacency. The rooms support each other and, frequently, the living room is the space to which the dining room is adjacent. In other words, the living room is the central space that the dining room should be near so that both spaces may function in a positive way.

The lesson in architectural design is free.

So it is with various functions and parts of university life. If there is something akin to a “living room” on a campus, that central aspect of campus life to which all others must be adjacent, it is academics. Anything that shades academic mission, or makes it secondary, will negatively influence its power. It does not make the other functions unimportant, but to the extent that anything imposes itself on academic excellence, a dysfunctional relationship of parts to whole is given life.

Academic excellence is perceived by some as an encumbrance to intercollegiate athletics success. Unfortunately, examples abound where unaligned priorities cause significant problems, sometimes with long-term consequences. A win-at-all-costs mentality for intercollegiate athletics ends up in the loss column.

Always. Remember SMU.

Athletics play a central role in public university life. It is important in private universities too, but it is different. When Columbia had a winless football program for years, it was a badge of courage of sorts. They probably even gave the coach a raise to compensate him for the humiliation he had to suffer.

That will not happen at a major public research university. Athletics must be competitive, and it must be, as my dad used to say, “as clean as a whistle.”

Here are the 2009 top public universities according to U.S. News: University of California – Berkeley, University of Virginia, UCLA, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, William and Mary, Georgia Tech, University of California – San Diego, University of Wisconsin and rounding out the list University of Illinois. Rankings are based on many factors and it is fair to say that almost all of the considerations have to do with academic prowess. I will not review the methodology of analysis.

While Sports Illustrated is not an authority on academic excellence, sports enthusiasts regard it highly for identifying excellence in games. Rankings of collegiate athletic programs based on athletic success measured in championships in all sports, bowl and tournament appearances and a range of

other factors indicating athletic excellence, 6 of the top 25 schools are on the U.S. News top 10 public university lists.

The adjacency of athletic prowess to academic excellence is clear. It is also clear that the very best institutions recognize the primacy of academic excellence as the organizing force, never the other way around.

In architectural terms, athletics are the dining room, not the living room.

Without listing the universities that mistakenly confuse the adjacency, suffice to say, they are not strong academically. SMU was a rare exception, and it made a rare mistake. Conventional wisdom would suggest that there are athletic powerhouses that are not on the academic list. This is misguided. Every one of the schools on the Sports Illustrated athletic excellence list is an academically competitive university, even if not among the top ten or twenty.

Correctly configured adjacencies create excellence in a building, and a university.