

10-2009

Our University – The Politics of Higher Education

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University – The Politics of Higher Education" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 16.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our University – The Politics of Higher Education

The University of Illinois has been bruised by its aired clout list, but it will recover. In fact, it will be a stronger institution for the focus this incident places on excellence and personal achievement as the measure of success, not politics.

A university president I know quietly stood tall for excellence with a donor and a board member by simply asking for a written request for special admission consideration with insight and justification from the board member. This heightened the nature of the request and the importance of constantly interceding for quality. No letter came.

Private institutions wrestle with the same issues. Preferential treatment is afforded the offspring of donors, or the offspring of the friends of donors, or of board members.

Not electoral or partisan politics but politics all the same.

You see it in contractual negotiations, and deal-making to appoint faculty, deans, provosts, chancellors and presidents. It can become the nature of the beast without dogged attention to academic issues.

Higher education has become more political in recent years for many reasons, but prime among them is that the university is being seen first as providing a public benefit to the locality and state.

And Tip O'Neil was right – “All politics are local”.

If we saw universities first as an opportunity to promote intellectual and moral development of individuals committed to the cause of the betterment of a nation rather than an organization committed to the cause of betterment of the nation by improving the lot of individuals, we would all be better served.

Slight but significant wordplay.

Intellectual and moral development is a personal matter. It may take a village to raise a child, but a university is built one student at a time by the commitment of individual students to attain excellence. Any public benefit derived from personal advancement and development is lagniappe when priorities are proper.

When the university becomes a public good with public responsibility as job one, the nature of the organization changes, it becomes political not academic.

A society will become stronger when its citizens seek higher levels of moral insight and intellectual ability. A knowledgeable electorate will power a republic more forcefully. There is no substitute.

If the university is seen as a tool of the state, or a public agency, like the department of corrections or the state highway department, quality will suffer. A political view may see the university as a job bank, or an opportunity for back-scratching. The legitimate fear at the University of Illinois was that a degradation of quality would evolve as influence superseded ability.

When any university puts any need above the student; any goal above individually attained excellence; any priority above scholarly work that brings distinction; and any vision where academic quality is sacrificed even with the best intentions - say of providing jobs - that university will be compromised in the attainment of its purpose.

The University of Illinois reinforced publically the primacy of attending to academic excellence. A board of trustees should protect excellence and mission, not pilfer for personal profit or political gain. These admissions were never going to ruin the quality of the institution; it is too high for so few to make too much impact.

But something more important to the university was headed out the window.

Integrity trumps even excellence, as without the former, the latter is a damaged good.

Even politics can't fix that.