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Our University – Underdogs

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Our University – Underdogs

Cub fans, lookout! Talk about underdogs and a passion for the position that marks a ball club. Like the Amazin' Mets, or Joe Namath's Jets. People gravitate towards underdogs. There is beauty and passion in it. Some students don't hit a stride until they are in their sophomore or junior year of college.

While not popular to say, some never do. They do not seem to have the ability or interest.

We do find students who by all measures are not ready, lack the course preparation, ACT scores, or the grade point average. They visit the campus, we see something that we like: spark, determination, passion, whatever it might be, and we say, let's take a chance.

This is productive for the individual and for the institution. Productive for the individual because it breathes life into hope. From one perspective a university education is all about hope. But such chance taking is good for the institution too. Some of these hopeful students become loyal supporters who testify, "This University changed my life!"

And they are right.

Who decides who the underdogs should be and how? Leaders and leadership are the answers.

Most universities run away from this kind of leadership. Too much risk.

However, those who really are anxious for a chance, and seem to have the drive to make it work are the underdogs we can help. We should run towards them. Even with a good history a student can enter the university and fail. Sorry to use that four letter word. We see that all the time.

Frequently we see students, who, by all indicators, should not be here, and they are frustrated, debt-burdened and unhappy with a series of choices that now have become part of the university experience.

There is little pride in offering an opportunity to a student who graduates in the top ten percent of her class, comes to our university, and then excels. We expect that. I had a friend who used to say about good students, "I am doing all I can to stay out of the way, this one is a skyrocket."

Some people don't appear to be ready to make the commitment but something tells us they are. We take a chance, like a two dollar long shot. And sometimes the bet pays off. The student becomes energized, takes to the work and excels.

Sometimes they become class leaders and we brim with pride.

In order for the university to make such decisions, we are forced to rely on human wisdom and insight, leadership, rather than a process of decision-making based on a mindlessly applied process that is “fair”.

We kill opportunity for students who are underdogs by not allowing university leadership, faculty and staff, to make mistakes. Retention rate, that number that indicates what percentage of students stay after the freshman year to start the sophomore year is dismally low at many institutions anyway, even with hyper-standardized completely consistent admission decision-making apparatus.

I wish we could put responsibility in the hands of local decision-makers and not have to protect ourselves against charges of unfairness or prejudice. However, the outcome of such localized decision making usually drift to telling everyone yes, and that does not work.

The most selective universities have the best retention rates. That is not a surprise. However, the very best universities find a way to override admission processes and give people a chance. The challenge is that you can't let everyone in.

And remember, the community college is always available as a way for a student to re-establish an academic record in a very cost-effective way.