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Our University – Competition

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Our University – Competition

When I was seventeen, like many young men I wanted a cool, fast car. Many of my generation will remember the significance of a '55, '56, or '57 Chevy. There were other cars, but all were second fiddle to the five, the six, or the seven. I could not afford one and soon figured out that, no matter how much I spent on this demonstration of who I was I would never win the race. There were too many other guys who had more.

I bought a '58 Chevy, not the sought after model but a Chevy none-the-less, and when I got done with it the car was cool enough to get the job done. I will spare you the details, but it was a fairly nice ride in current parlance.

The lesson in this for me: Mark the territory for your competition. There were some areas where I could not effectively compete and I left them alone and focused on the areas where I could. The '58 was OK if I approached it correctly.

So it should be with universities.

With increasing frequency, universities that try to compete on cost alone will lose to the University of Phoenix, the DeVry University, the Community Colleges, and the plethora of online opportunities to secure something that looks like a university degree. It would be like me buying a bicycle because I could not find a 5, 6, or 7 that I could afford and “do it right.” Rather I went with a different kind of car, but still a car. Focusing on any aspect of university life other than academic excellence is akin to buying the bicycle rather than the car.

A university is a university.

Not a trade school, not a diploma mill, and not a credentialing academy that provides wall ornaments - like hood ornaments - with nothing under the hood. Many post-secondary educational institutions serve society well through the execution of a purpose, but they are not universities.

And more telling, a university trying to be like one of these other institutions will become the other institution and cease to be a university.

All universities must compete with other universities to be considered a university. Institutions that carry the name university must be good at a minimum of two things.

First, a university must provide a general education leading a student to be an educated human being. This means that the graduate can read, write, think critically, calculate and understand basic mathematical principles – calculus - it means they are familiar with western and non-western thought and understand the significance of the great world religions and how their personal persuasion ties into the greater social order. Achieving these goals is no mean task and many institutions, of every stripe, fail.

A university must help people become well educated in the general sense.

Secondly, a university must build an academic reputation. It must compete in some field of endeavor, in a way which is regarded widely by other universities as being exemplary in quality. The areas of focus are as varied as the universities; the common ground is that an institution is recognized as being good at something and providing excellence in general education. Athletics does not count, nor does cheap, nor does size. These are not academic pursuits and, while exceedingly valuable in some measure, not suitable replacements for academic excellence in the competitive market place of higher education.

At our university we can not be all things to all people, but we need to be good at two things, or we are not what we should be.