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Our University – Service Motive

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Our University – Service Motive

Anyone paying attention to higher education knows the familiar mantra: teaching, research and service. This three legged stool of mission is resident in nearly every public and private university in the United States and it is even leaking into institutions overseas in the rush to imitate what makes American higher education the best in the world.

On many occasions, I have had the opportunity to get involved with communities near the universities where I worked. Community planning, energy conservation, workshops on neighborhood development, and other manifestations of “service” or outreach from the university to the community are common in nearly every discipline on a research university campus.

Health and legal counseling, dental work, business advice, lawn and garden care, financial and investment counsel, and a multitude of other forms of service are provided to members of the community through universities all the time. Our university has a great tradition of such action. Recently, I had the privilege as is frequently the case to talk with a group of community leaders in one of our towns in southern Illinois about a planning project that may give the community ideas for a brighter future and students a special learning experience.

This is exciting.

Judging motives is like trying to hold a fish. Every time you think you have a handle, it goes in another direction.

Nothing is more important in the value of service to a university and the communities it serves than the motive for service. And there are many.

Sometimes service is rendered because a person needs service for annual review or promotion. This is a cynical but reasonable perspective.

Occasionally, a departmental or college leader may encourage faculty and staff to render service as a means of promoting their unit within the campus environment. A kind of bragging right that might help with the budgeting process on the campus.

University leadership service may be rendered to gain political favor. A well served community, or interest group within the community might have impact on a local legislator, and she might have impact on funding for the university.

At different levels within the structure of the organization different motives might exist for the provision of service. No matter the internal motives if the service

provided is not excellent, what starts as a positive step for the university ends in a ditch. The fact that the service provided is “free” will not matter if it is not well executed.

All service provided must serve the student.

If getting promoted outweighs excellence in educational opportunity for the student both service and learning will be low in value, even if the promotion goes through.

If departmental or college prestige is held above the experience of the student, the unit and individual will suffer, even if the budget grows.

If political sway for the university is valued over the students’ acquisition of knowledge and insight the university loses, even if it gains political support for a season.

Most dramatic and important for me, if the motive for service is not excellence in educational opportunity, the service rendered to person or community will be second rate, and nothing is more hurtful to a university than the perception of second rate effort and, therefore, result.

“However brilliant an action, it should not be esteemed great unless the result of a great motive.” Francois de la Rochefoucauld.

Our university, in every action it takes, must pursue only one high motive: the enlightenment of the student, even as we serve the community. All else will follow.