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Our University: Reputation

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our University: Reputation

Abraham Lincoln said, *“Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing”*.

Any university with strong character and commitment to academic excellence will have a good reputation. You cannot stop reputational growth under these conditions. It should go without saying, but we see universities that downplay academic quality and excellence as the lifeblood of institutional mission and lift up senseless substitutes. The deeds of an institution frame character and reputation.

A great university casts a great shadow.

Having worked at every level of the university I think, as do many faculty members and administrators, about the importance of reputation as a true reflection of excellence. I can attest to the notion that reputation meets somewhere just about in the middle of the institution.

About half of the university shadow is created at the dean’s level and above, through the chancellor, president and the board of trustees.

Leaders create reputation. How is excellence recognized and rewarded? What are leadership’s priorities? How are budgets managed? How is funding generated? Is leadership honest, straightforward, sincere, and knowledgeable about what a university is and how one works? Do leaders hold academic values regarding scholarship and the import of seeking truth in academic pursuits? Are they honest and sincere?

The community response to these shadow-casting questions casts a powerful shadow itself. Where there is disingenuousness the community knows: excellence and enrollment suffer.

That is one half of shadow casting.

The other half comes from faculty and staff who work to achieve excellence in the classroom, laboratory, studio and library. Academic excellence is a character trait squeezed out of the work of teaching and learning by faculty and students, below the level of dean.

If an academic unit is excellent, it casts a strong, powerful shadow. Students tell parents about caring professors and teaching excellence; about scholarly pursuits and research accomplishments; and parents tell friends; and friends tell associates; and before long there is a saturated network of positive reflection breathing out what is put in every day.

The tree is solid and the shadow is strong.

Even in the face of poor leadership, a good reputation can prevail if it is diligently attended to by faculty and staff. However, the opposite is not true. No matter how good the leadership, less than excellent faculty and staff will produce less than excellent results because, as the physicist I.I. Rabi told then Columbia President Dwight Eisenhower, "*Mr. President, the faculty are not the employees of the university. They are the university.*"

Excellence matters.

The first cause of the university is to change the way that people think, and leadership for that change can come from executive offices and boardrooms, but the work of change occurs when the synapse sparks between teacher and student.

Robert Lowery and Brian Silver suggest, in a 1996 study of rankings by the National Research Council "*A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats: The Political Science Department Reputation and the Reputation of the University*", that the same principles hold. The interdependence of the quality of faculty work and university support for excellence is established.

A shadow is cast.

When universities support superiority by recognizing it through rewards to excellence with resources to faculty, universities will benefit with a strong, sharp, high contrast shadow.

Likewise when professors demand quality, earned positive reputation will flourish.

Imagine a university abiding a contract with a faculty union that does not once contain the word "excellence" or "quality", as either expectation or demand.

Imagine the impact that such a governing document has on tree and shadow.

Imagine a university's character and reputation living in such a shadow.