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Our University: Student-Directed Integrity

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Our University: Student-Directed Integrity

Integrity presents itself in many forms in university life. In the coming weeks, I will address various aspects of integrity, for the chilling impact its absence has on the fundamental nature of the university, and how one works.

Institutions owe honesty to every student who indicates an interest in study, or who is presently engaged in study, or who has completed study. A lack of institutional integrity has a profoundly negative impact on all students, past, present, and future.

Over the past two years, according to a New York Times story by Catherine Rampell, ten U.S. law schools have displayed a stunning lack of integrity toward their students. They have adjusted grading systems in a way that inflates grades so that students with lower grades appear to be more like students with higher grades, to give them better job prospects.

This is emptiness.

These universities have demeaned the hard work of students who earned their excellent grades. This action further demeans a profession already the target of criticism for its crassness, but now publicly institutionalizes the accusations of low integrity and appearance of low intellectual commitment, rather than trumpeting high quality and earned integrity.

Maybe the tagline from the John Travolta movie, "*A Civil Action*" was correct, "Justice has its price."

In a piece published in April 2010, ***Our University: Lying, Cheating, and Stealing*** - <http://walterwendler.wordpress.com/2010/04/16/our-university-lying-cheating-and-stealing/> - I addressed the issue of grade inflation. This current manifestation is different and more frightening in its implication regarding a degree and its ultimate value.

Here, by institutional edict, expressly for the purpose of improving a student's employability, grades are inflated by leadership to improve the stature of the graduate and the university.

How short-sighted. Some elite institutions with deep histories for excellence, such as Georgetown and NYU, are succumbing to the apparent appeal of low integrity.

Why is it that institutions, even decidedly good institutions, are willing to display such a lack of integrity about the teaching, learning, and evaluation processes that are used to assess students? If it is to help graduates gain employment, the

assumption of ignorance of potential employers by university leadership, is unabashed arrogance.

In courtrooms and boardrooms, where lawyers ply their craft, expectation of impeccable integrity from attorneys should run high. In part, that integrity springs from the institutions where counsels earned degrees, and grades.

The cost of a legal education is high. The debt that many students take on to attain the experience is a great burden. Raise employability by raising standards... or admit that the diploma is merely a receipt for three years of significant tuition and fees.

And let the market place decide.

If there is no correlation between a school's name recognition and skill level for three-fourths of its graduates, people will stop attending. The probabilities reflected in something approaching a bell-curve suggest that excellence rarely occurs more often than one-fourth of the time.

That is the marketplace and how it works. To artificially and systematically twist the market is a perversion of institutional integrity. That chicken will come home to roost. Lying about student performance, individually or collectively, is cruel and unjust.

Hank Williams appreciated this perspective when he intoned the famous line, "*Your cheatin' heart will tell on you.*"

At any university changing grades or grading systems to make students more employable after they have graduated, or to ensure employability when they are studying, does so at great risk to reputation; the primary source of value to future students.

It is short-sightedly sinister from my perspective.

Our university and all others must demonstrate the highest level of integrity toward students.