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Our University: Integrity at the Top

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Our University: Integrity at the Top

Third in a series on integrity.

American Universities have been created in a uniquely American mold; a marketplace of institutions, some public and some private. Non-profit organizations have been the norm in both settings, though the last decade has seen the emergence of for-profit “educational service” providers an option not addressed here.

All receive tax dollars. The less public institutions still receive tax dollars through loans and subsidies from the taxpayer’s pocket book. The traditional private college may receive its primary funding through gifts, grants, auxiliary enterprises and student tuition and fees, but many still get significant amounts of state and federal tax dollars for research (on top of loans and grants provided to fund students’ attendance, see <http://walterwendler.wordpress.com/2010/07/02/our-university-fiscal-integrity/>.)

According to *The Center for Measuring University Performance*, of the top ten university research expenditure budgets, Johns Hopkins University, leads the group, receiving \$1.5 billion in 2008.

While some research funding comes from private sources, the majority at most institutions come from federal and states coffers. In the case of Johns Hopkins, nearly \$1.3 billion came from federal resources. Universities with modest research expenditures, in the range of \$100 million per year, comprise a significant portion of the thousands of universities in the nation.

Much of this funding is distributed based on university reputation. This comes in part through peer review of past research, but also from a history of integrity to academic standards and intellectual rigor of both the university and the people who are associated with it at all levels.

America’s passion and appreciation for higher education leads to competition for the best faculty and students, as well as for the federal and private support that makes possible their contributions across the many fields of academic endeavor.

When a university’s reputation is soiled by impropriety at any level, but especially by its leaders, it raises questions of both competence and reliability. This, in turn, can make it difficult to court those individuals best able to further the University’s mission or secure the funding for their work.

Universities are built on trust relationships at every level. Research is fueled by the belief that scholars will be honest in their findings, and produce replicable results in basic and applied research that have validity and stand the test of peer

review. Students pay tuition and fees to join a community of scholars based in large measure on the idea that past performance will equate with future performance: that they will receive the best efforts of the university and faculty. This is trust, and trust is a result of a sustained pattern of integrity.

The community will come to the University for help if they trust both their intentions and abilities. In today's media saturated environment, this trust can be tarnished by any impropriety associated with the University's image, including the personal scandals of faculty, staff, or even students.

When leadership at any level fails to deliver on the expectation of truth and honesty the reputation of the organization will diminish in the eye of the paying public. Our best behavior is always required because any breach of trust depletes our ability to generate resources needed in the classroom, the lab, and the larger community.

GE used to say that "progress is our most important product". At a University, integrity may hold that "most important" spot, as all of the organizing forces that bind together a community of scholars and researchers flow from the trust integrity makes possible.

Absent integrity, a public university is no more than a patronage machine, a private university just a second rate finishing school, both, nothing more than shell games.