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Our University – Reputation by Teaching

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Our University – Reputation by Teaching

Third in a series on teaching excellence

Over the past few years there has been incessant talk about university marketing to increase enrollment. There is more competition to be sure. Research university presidents refer to regional universities and community colleges as competition. What a regrettable and ill-informed mindset. Mix in the online for-profits and the equation gets even more complex for the convenience they provide with asynchronous learning opportunity.

Marketing strategies can never surpass teaching excellence as evidenced by faculty passion, no matter how thin the briefcase of the consultant, hourly rates, or impressive client lists.

In research university settings, the common concern about teaching is that it is impossible to assess quality in a uniform manner, and therefore very difficult to use teaching as an indicator of excellence. On campuses, with faculty unions, the mention of teaching excellence in contracts is non-existent, and the lowest common denominator becomes minimum expectation which relentlessly degrades to aspiration.

Faculty unions aren't guilds. Excellence in the profession is not their goal. Read the contracts. These instruments, and the people who fabricate them from both sides, lead to abject unfairness by treating all faculty the same, providing neither tangible nor intangible reward for excellence.

In a recent Chronicle of Higher Education piece, "*Why Teaching is not Priority No. 1*", the argument is offered directly and simply, "Faculty rewards have nothing to do with the ability to assess student learning." Little correlation is acknowledged between effective student learning and excellent teaching: as if the two were not joined at the hip. The argument is not that student learning is a better indicator: just that it is more easily and reliably assessed.

Too bad. Students know the genuine article when they see it.

More credence should be placed on students' perception of teaching quality. Student learning assessment instruments are manipulated more easily than the students' perception of the quality of instruction they receive.

Trust ratings of students over a three- or four-year period. They tell the truth.

When faculty members build reputation through excellent teaching, students advertise it by word of mouth, the most powerful kind.

In most research universities, when reputation is built regionally, it is based on teaching excellence. When reputation is built nationally or internationally, it is based on scholarly and creative discovery, and panache.

Delyte Morris, president of Southern Illinois University for the dramatic post WWII growth period, hired Buckminster Fuller to join the faculty. He may have been a great teacher. I know many people said he was, but he brought national and international recognition or in today's parlance "marketing pitch," to the institution the day he set foot on the campus. He was a well known thinker.

Building reputation by bringing in genius, or developing it from within, is a valid approach.

But there is another way that takes courage, leadership, and confidence in faculty and students - scarce commodities on many contemporary university campuses, driven away by politics, pettiness, and passivity:

For most research universities, clearly the balance of the 400 or so that exist in the United States, the best marketing investment is in recognizing, and rewarding excellence in teaching. Universities must extol teaching excellence as a necessary counterpart, a twin of sorts, to the scholarly and intellectual ability of faculty if they want to signal to students the priority for education. Why else would an eager student choose a university?

When poor teaching is evident, faculty members should be encouraged to improve, and never rewarded based on any measure other than classroom ability.

Excellent teachers honestly sell our university in spite of bureaucracies conceived, designed, and fabricated to mask mediocre teaching.