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Our University – Mission and Purpose

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Our University – Mission and Purpose

Some corporate mythology: A company that made its fortune selling drill bits was having difficulty with a sinking market. The president called together his leadership team from across the country. He brought in high priced consultants. He inquired of this brain trust whether or not anyone had any ideas about why drill bit sales were so dismal. One otherwise quiet executive from the Deep South raised his hand and said sheepishly *“Sir, I think the problem is that we are trying desperately to sell drill bits, but what our customers want are holes.”*

This metaphorical story provides cogent insight: Focus is everything. Xerox was the early leader in the development and marketing of photocopy machines. They sold machines and supplies but sales lagged. When Xerox leased machines and charged customers per copy, profits soared. People wanted copies, not machines.

Some good universities sell anything and everything but academic excellence. Budgets get tight and academic excellence in teaching and scholarship is not recognized, or is trivialized by meaningless trinkets, when substantive reward is required. If rewards seem expensive, compare their price to falling behind the academically-obsessed emerging markets of the world’s economy.

Universities should not be selling ivy-covered halls, food courts, or even athletic entertainment any more than that apocryphal company should have been selling drill bits, or Xerox, machines.

We provide the opportunity for students to change the way they think and relate to the world for the rest of their lives.

Many universities are suffering budget cuts. Furloughs, mandated closings, and layoffs are part of the language of the day on many campuses around the nation.

When leadership focuses on the purpose of the university: changing the way people think, it does not have to sell the experience. People come to them to buy.

Leading takes focus and sense of purpose because the prevailing forces, especially in universities that are public, can become political rather than academic. Even academic forces can unknowingly, or unwittingly, work against the real purpose of the place. A union that is intent on lowering minimum standards rather than raising them misses the point.

As a relatively new faculty member, I was asked to consider a post as an associate dean for academic affairs in a large college of architecture. Being inexperienced I

asked a much more senior faculty member who had been around the block what he thought the job entailed. *What were the key aspects of the academic mission of the college? What kinds of things would I need to deal with? Just what were academic affairs?*

We were sitting in his office and he looked and pointed out the window to a sidewalk in front of his office. He drawled, *“That crack yonder (This was not in New York.)...in the sidewalk... a student could get a shoe stuck in that crack and break off a heel, twist an ankle, or otherwise be impaired in his progress to class.”* He continued, *“That makes that crack academic affairs.”*

Perspective.

Anything that gets between a faculty member who sees her mission as helping a student change the way he thinks and a student who desires such a change in his life represents academic affairs and must be included among the first priorities for a good university.

If you think this is obvious, take a look at your university and watch how some wander around, talking about marketing opportunities rather than academics.

We need holes, not drill bits, copies not copiers. Our university will prosper as it focuses on mission and purpose, and admits that everything else is secondary. In the long run, academic excellence will ensure job security through economic development more effectively than any pretty marketing pictures of the campus or the most generous union contracts.