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Our University – Fiduciaries and Excellence

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Our University – Fiduciaries and Excellence

Leadership is primarily a fiduciary action.

A fiduciary is charged with giving priority to the interests of others over self in a way that engenders and protects trust. Frequently the idea is associated with fiscal affairs and legal perspectives. Surely these are components of fiduciary action - but only two. Fiduciaries of universities - trustees, regents, or overseers - are responsible for complex, dynamic, interacting interests, and must constantly be wary of potential errors of commission and omission.

A fiduciary cannot profit in any way from his position, or even appear to, for that would erode the powerful but delicate concept of trust. In the case of universities, an effective fiduciary is attentive to the interests of the institution above her own. It's not a position for the faint-at-heart or weak-willed, based on the numbers of failures and near failures witnessed on a recurring basis.

We need not look further than the malfeasance at the University of Illinois and the “clout lists” maintained there, but we could. Examples abound where trustees endorse or condone poor, immoral, or illegal behavior, and cheating from executives that include engagement in inappropriate business affairs, hiring practices that favor political associates, relatives and friends, and other forms of favoritism that undermine the faith and confidence they are sworn to uphold.

Problematic in any organization but debilitating in a university.

When fiduciaries fail to exhibit and protect trust, a university changes. Actions that undermine or abridge trust in any way sacrifice quality.

Without strong fiduciaries nothing else matters. Enrollments will falter, student quality will suffer, ACT or SAT scores will fall, research productivity will lag, quarterbacks will throw interceptions, basketball teams will be sluggish and weeds will remain unpicked in gardens. Only high expectations guided by trust create results. The appearance of success can be conjured up for a season but, without trust, successes of all kinds are fleeting.

There is a “trickle down” effect for excellence and mission commitment, and however the board acts, the university will become. If the board believes excellence is foremost in the mission of a campus, it will eventually become excellent. The board will hire and empower people of excellence to lead the organization, who will in turn hire qualified people to fill positions of leadership, who will then entrust the daily work of the campus only to capable people. It is powerful to see an organization alive with the confluence of

commitment to purpose, transparency in trust, and excellence in execution of day-to-day tasks.

And sometimes too rare.

Using a fiduciary position as a means to gain anything for personal benefit will rot a university from the inside out.

Find a university bent towards excellence and behind it you will find a strong board.

In outlining the responsibilities of the newly formulated Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in 1965 then Governor John Connally suggested, among other things that, *“Neither I nor the Legislature can guarantee the success of your efforts. Only you can do that. Human beings, not laws, achieve progress. Thus the success or the failure of House Bill I will be your success or failure”*.

The same axiom applies to individual institutions.

The public trust is built on the actions of individuals. No more, no less. Micro-management, turns of phrase, legal machinations hatched in back rooms, profiteering, or fades and fast-talk of trust simply ensure that the institutional mission will never come to pass.

And every trustee appreciates what Governor Connally said. He affirmed what history teaches...that we should abstain from even the appearance of wrongdoing. The role of the trustee is burdensome, but trustees shape a university . . . which can shape a person ... who may shape society.

Excellence is the child of trust.