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Our University – Student Leadership - Passion, Pride and Purpose

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Our University – Student Leadership - Passion, Pride and Purpose

A shared vision for a university energizes people. Students must be partners in that vision casting process because theirs is the most fundamental experience that defines whether we have succeeded as an educational institution, and, more importantly to institutions in the competitive academic marketplace, they advertise with their voices and vote with their feet, and Tweet and Facebook to boot.

Building a shared vision in an organization is not about everybody saluting the wall where the vision statement is posted. It's about people doing things together that they care about.

-Peter Senge

I recently spoke to a group of engineering students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale in the Leadership Development Program in Engineering and Technology founded by the Blaudow/ATS Leadership Scholarship. It is a microcosm of what makes a university work.

The Blaudow/ATS leadership program is configured for students transferring from community colleges. This is a welcome opportunity, as most scholarships are not available to transfer students.

This innovative program addresses issues of affordability common to many students, providing a high aid/high motivation approach to reducing attendance cost. The scholarships provide \$18,000 over two years and a three-month paid internship. This is a powerful combination of achievement, reward and opportunity. The program, funded in part by a \$600,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, represents institutional innovation toward an important goal I've mentioned before: serving students who don't fit the traditional mold.

Dick Blaudow is an insightful leader, an innovator who works hard to give engineering students the opportunity to excel. His generosity recognizes the importance of the public/private marriage that makes higher education work. Dick and his wife provided an initial gift of \$250,000 in support of leadership development. More resources have followed, including great insight from a successful and committed graduate.

The leadership of the College of Engineering, Associate Dean Lizette Chevalier, supports this program because it supports students, and that is her goal.

Bruce DeRuntz, an associate professor of engineering, directs the program. He is committed to providing students with leadership experiences and training. According to Dick, the technical skills required of engineers are just "...table stakes, the really good students want to become leaders." Professor DeRuntz is facilitating that leadership vision.

And John Nicklow, former Associate Dean of the College of Engineering, now leader of Enrollment Management for the university, is still committed to nurturing students. He has a deep passion for their success.

All of the pieces: students, faculty, donors, federal agencies, and administrators are working together to produce what all good universities crave- students who aspire to do things well, and work to meet those aspirations.

Although every notation above is important, none are really the subject of this week's thought. Here is the crust of the biscuit.

These aspiring engineers are putting their leadership skills to work in student government. They are preparing a plan that does not express concern about increasing costs of university attendance, although that is an important issue. They are not lobbying to get better parking places on campus: Pauli's Exclusion Principle in quantum mechanics established the fact in 1925 that two particles cannot occupy the same place at the same time. It won't work with Fords and Chevys either. The real problem in university parking is not that there are too few spaces; rather that 50% of the campus population wants the same space 50% of the time. That is Wendler's Exclusion Principle. Wolfgang Pauli and the campus police agree, "No can do."

These future leaders are not asking for pass/fail grading, more parties, longer holidays or better athletics teams or no athletics teams at all.

Rather, these students are asking for the university to prioritize the kind of teaching that will allow them to excel as engineers and leaders, rather than settling for "meets minimum standards"-type efforts.

They actually believe leadership should flow from the merit that results from dedication and effort.

I have never heard this from student government, a faculty senate, a faculty collective bargaining unit, or any other organization that purports to have the best interest of the university at heart.

No, but from this group of engineering students and their interest in leadership, it comes without varnish or apology.