

11-16-2011

# Our Universities: Public Leadership Private Morality

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## Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Public Leadership Private Morality" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 126.  
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## Our Universities: Public Leadership Private Morality

The separation of private beliefs and public expression of those may be acceptable in many settings (though I am not convinced that is the case) but it is absolutely unacceptable for university leadership. University leadership is private morality expressed publically.

Nothing more, nothing less.

*"I never did, or countenanced, in public life, a single act inconsistent with the strictest good faith; having never believed there was one code of morality for a public, and another for a private man."*

Thomas Jefferson, Founder, University of Virginia.

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The Penn State student response to the firing of Joe Paterno was a predictable follow up to what appears to be a morality vacuum at a major public university. Most heartbreaking is that it is not a vacuum at all, but the unfortunate status quo due to university leadership. And the pain of the victims of fear, inability, cowardice, self-service and moral bankruptcy cannot be assuaged. Students regularly witness university leadership's turned heads from immorality of every kind.

Our students become what we are.

Tolerance has been preached diligently: rarely is anyone held to account for their actions. University leadership is certainly not responsible for its actions: every imaginable form of indiscretion is accepted at universities by political leaders and the academic leaders they appoint. Instead of beacons of light, universities are becoming buckets of moral litter. No right, no wrong.

Leaders believe that sweeping actions under the rug: things like promiscuity, plagiarism and other forms of cheating, lying, stealing; bid rigging, and similar indiscretions, protects the reputation of the university. Hiding inappropriate behavior benefits morally bankrupt scallywags that engage in immoral activities...for a season. But bubbles burst. The media is overflowed with such accounts, and evidently we like this path. The well worn course liberates leaders and students from any moral responsibility, public or private.

We have become tolerant to the point of moral numbness and illiteracy.

Rarely, if ever, do we hear a university leader say, "We all have moral compasses, and mine says this behavior or activity causes me concern, and I will not turn my head from

it, but rather will at least point out publically what I see privately. Sorry in advance for any offense, but here it goes..."

Joe Paterno and Graham Spanier certainly wish they did, rather than accepting the prevailing tolerant view of not pointing out private views of immorality. I know they have personal views. Try not having one. Suggesting a given behavior is wrong from a personal perspective is the job, not a luxury or a right. And nobody wants it.

Leaders not willing to do this crucial work should leave or be enthusiastically fired. And expecting others to adopt their point of view is equally unacceptable. Leaders should lead rather than cower in the bushes, make the next appointment cycle, or get lavish contracts renewed and signed.

Inaction for fear of expressing personal morality is devastating to universities. Students do not know how to integrate an intellectual view with a moral system because we lie to them regularly and tell them there is no place for this thinking in universities unless all agree on what is appropriate, right, and just.

Coaches and academic leaders at Penn State, if allegations are true, committed crimes. An abject lack of personal moral leadership in a public way, while technically not a crime, robs teaching opportunity. Students come to believe that private morality does not matter publically.

If a university leader does not think this is his or her job, they should step aside. Immediately. If a university leader bends to the prevailing wind of not-rocking-the-boat for fear of an interest group of any persuasion, he or she should resign. Immediately. That is the crime of Penn State, and more unfortunately, the crime at most universities in the nation. Pilfering from students the opportunity to learn to live within a chosen moral framework, guided by a moral compass, directed towards sound public behavior, is not an option like real leather seats instead of vinyl. Without such consideration there is no education at all. But many in university leadership fear education for its contentiousness. They should get out.

The art of leadership, on the shifting sands of what passes for public morality, calls for leaders to express their private views publically and respectfully. To deny personal views on subjects of moral import is a devastating failure to lead. The price of expression can be very high, the cost of public silence, even higher, although much slower and more cancerous in realization.

Ask Joe and Graham. They know, as did Friedrich Freiherr von Logau, that, "The mills of the god's grind exceeding slow, but exceedingly fine."