

12-14-2011

Our Universities: Me, Me, Me

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Me, Me, Me" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 129.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/129

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Our Universities: Me, Me, Me

Increasing costs, lavish loans, low performance standards, the absence of merit, and a lost sense of mission contribute to the diminishment of the effectiveness of public higher education. But most loathsome and detrimental is an organization hell-bent on deflecting every modicum of individual responsibility. The sole aim of the bureaucracy is to make sure that personal reasonability evaporates in procedure.

"You will never understand bureaucracies until you understand that the bureaucrats procedure is everything and outcomes are nothing."

Thomas Sowell

Why is it that some people in large organizations, like universities, find every imaginable excuse to do anything other than what they were hired to do. Universities are not alone. A recent case in the Illinois Department of Corrections involves a warden out on disability photographed fishing with a state elected leader. You might imagine that the state would demand that he give back the tens of thousands of dollars he received based on his supposed incapacity.

But you would be wrong.

Instead, he was given an easier job, and continues to draw his salary.

Why does this happen, and what does it have to do with universities?

Large bureaucracies frequently evolve in ways that allow people to spend more time protecting their own interests than pursuing the mission of the institutions they supposedly serve.

I am not talking about clerical workers or janitors working at something near minimum wage, but executive leadership.

Hired to lead, they instead protect their positions, look after self-interests and use the system to their own benefit, neglecting their duty to the organization and its purpose. They spend their days making sure that they get what they believe is their right from the system they "serve."

Mission neglect is extracting a tremendous toll on American enterprise. The highest costs may be in quasi-governmental enterprises like universities. No secular organization is more defined by its institutional purpose than a university.

We see countless examples at universities, of individuals turning a blind eye when their coworkers or leaders engage in betrayals of the public trust. Sexual misconduct, the inappropriate use of power and position, and the decay educational standards are all symptoms of the same festering condition: the decline of integrity.

I wish I could believe that these examples of leadership malfeasance and impropriety could be exorcized by the example of leaders showing dedication and integrity. However, I fear that this will not happen of its own accord.

If universities are to maintain their history of positive individual and social impact, the expectations of boards and elected leadership must be focused like a laser on the development of the organization to serve its constituents, and divest itself of anything or anyone that diverts attention or resources from that purpose.

Leaders will risk the wrath of individuals who misuse the opportunities provided to them. *Leaders* will call individuals and organizations to task. *Leaders* must be fearless, because holding high institutional standards becomes a risky proposition when power can be accumulated trading favors and finding nooks and crannies of respite in rules and regulations rather than progress.

Leadership and management (and with shared governance, I include faculty in this class) must take responsibility for producing the highest and best educational opportunity for students, or our universities will fail miserably.

This perspective is seen as radical. Since the turn of the 20th century, and particularly since the 1950's, the priority of state universities has been to protect bureaucrats and institutional employees first, and serve students only after such protection is assured.

Private and not-for-profit institutions have begun to assume the mantle of leadership being shed by many public university leaders and boards, because private institutions know that they must place students first in the educational equation. Otherwise their funding evaporates especially as federal loans are more closely scrutinized.

They do what is right because the market demands it. They do what is right because people are willing to pay for it. They may even do what is right, simply *because* it's the right thing to do. When they do it, though, lines at the front doors grow very long. They will do for profit or subsistence the things that public universities used to do for passion and honor.

As necessary and laudable as it is to protect the rights of individuals in the workplace, it cannot come at the expense of serving students.

If public higher education doesn't change in the next decade, mismanagement will lead to the demise of universities as educational institutions and aid in their transformation into mere state bureaucracies.