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Our Universities: Collegiate Cronyism

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our Universities: Collegiate Cronyism

The absence of transparency and forthrightness can destroy organizations built on trust - churches, universities and the like. Lacking these, educational institutions become like Wal-Mart. Now, I am a Wal-Mart fan, but I find myself on guard every time I enter one. I know exactly why Sam Walton invented his machine. He wanted to turn my wishes into his dollars. He was reasonably transparent about it. It was his business. And as Hyman Roth said in *Godfather II*, *"This is the business we've chosen."* We don't like to think of schools, churches, and government this way, but maybe we ought to as nobility of mission is crushed under the weight of human frailty.

"We're always saying we're a meritocracy, but we operate like an old boys' network."

Rita Bornstein, President Emerita of Rollins College

Collegiate cronyism stains entire communities, indirectly sullyng the reputation of faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

Richard Herman, former University of Illinois Chancellor, resigned a \$400,000 a year position as leader of the Urbana-Champaign campus for his participation in a particular breed of collegiate cronyism where admissions were based, in part, on applicants' relationships to elected officials in Illinois. Herman, along with University of Illinois President, Joseph B. White, recognized the error of their ways, stepping down over this scandal. Frankly, both of these men had a great deal to offer the University of Illinois. Their considerable skills could have been put to use by the university system, had they been able to withstand the pervasive pressure of political push and pull of a Rod Blagojevich-directed board.

The most sensational case of the last decade occurred in New Jersey, at the intersection of academic and political forces. The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey provided a peephole into corruption, patronage, and political favors at the state level that defies description. Even second and third generation Chicagoans would blush. Many good people sat and watched. They saw the university as a cross between bedeviled business and push-button political duplicity. Chris Christie, then U.S. Attorney, got out the broom and went to work.

Crony capitalism is all about distorting responsibilities. It happens whenever somebody who should be responsible to a community instead decides to give higher priority to the needs of a family member, a patron or a co-conspirator, or to self. It can bring down economies, and lately has proven disastrous to our national spirit: a spirit derived from individual energy, motivation, and accomplishment competing on a level playing field.

The fleeting tangibility of their “products” means that universities are particularly dependent on the public trust. That trust is slowly earned based on the quality of the school’s graduates, the products of its research, and the myriad of opportunities to add to the public good that it takes or misses. When that reputation is soiled through the malfeasance, stupidity, or the selfishness of an individual in a position of power, the repercussions are not only visited upon the guilty party but also on the innocent.

Perhaps cronyism’s pervasiveness across institutional types allows people to justify their own participation. Examples can be found in political and business organizations, faith groups, and universities. These last two are most pernicious because these institutions profess to provide the moral compass that will allow us to recognize the nature of temptation in the first case and intellectual honesty in the second.

One cost of leadership is that family and friends should not pursue certain opportunities for which they might otherwise be eligible. University leaders’ salaries provide compensation for the doors that must be closed in order to maintain the public’s trust. At the University of New Mexico, Brian Schmidly, son of President David Schmidly, was hired at an annual salary of \$94,000 to become the Associate Director of Sustainability for the campus. Qualifications and experience notwithstanding, parental influence by Brian’s dad could have had an impact on the hiring decision. Regents are trustees and exercise fiduciary oversight, but they seemingly looked the other way.

Might a family member have the qualifications for a particular job? Of course. But there is no obvious way to ensure that an evaluation of those qualifications has been made objectively, and, in any position based on trust, we must avoid both the act **and** the appearance of wrongdoing. As St. Paul admonished in his letter to the Thessalonians, "Abstain from all appearance of evil."

Cronyism undermines merit, and therefore undermines education. Most disquieting, it is at times difficult to determine whether the outside political world pollutes the university, or, as nearly sacred seats of learning and honest inquiry, our universities may be sowing seeds of skullduggery in society’s most fertile soil: future leaders.