

2-29-2012

Our Universities: Traditions

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Traditions" (2012). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 139.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/139

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our Universities: Traditions

Universities are defined by their traditions. They can take many forms, some positive, and some negative, but all communities have traditions shaped by citizens who reside there, and a university is a community. Traditions cannot be regulated or imposed, but must rise from within.

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy who merely happen to be walking around.

Gilbert K. Chesterton

No university exists without traditions.

Universities that desire to establish positive cultures must aim towards traditions that recognize desirable accomplishment. For example, at Texas A&M University there is a powerful tradition associated with the attainment of an Aggie Ring. A student must have completed 95 hours of coursework to order The Ring. This tradition is passed on from one generation of students to the next. It recognizes the value of individually-driven attainment to the community and acknowledges that, as Aggies, personal and institutional reputations will be intertwined from that point forward. Forever.

Peter M. Mogolda, in a piece entitled ***The Campus Tour: Ritual And Community In Higher Education***, discusses how “the use of rituals generates a sense of community” that is seen as such a valuable means of differentiating one university from another, that they often become a central marketing theme to attract potential students. A community is more likely to be productive when its members are engaged in their common work. Rituals help a community pass down and reinforce shared mission. But, since rituals only develop in an environment of meaningful community experiences, they can also be used as a performance measure.

Rituals provide a framework for understanding meanings that are bigger than the concerns of an individual. I am not sure that it takes a village to raise a child, but the likelihood of success in anything is higher when someone belongs to something bigger than themselves... a family, a house of worship, a village, a community, an institution.

Unfortunately, in many universities, rituals and traditions are being replaced by performance measures in a clumsy attempt to quantify the student experience rather than create it.

Rituals breed a sense of belonging and bonding that Peter McLaren illuminated in a study of a parochial school in a working class Toronto neighborhood. He suggested, *“Rituals play a crucial and ineradicable role in the whole of the student’s existence”*.

Traditions and rituals are an important component of the university experience at the best schools, but it must also be acknowledged that some institutions are so laden with traditions that excellence is subjugated to sacrament. Traditions, the liturgy of a community, can run amok leading students to participate in acts that, in any other setting, would be unthinkable. Recent revelations about hazing in the Marching 100 Band at Florida A&M University provide but one example.

Destructive traditions act with the same force as positive ones.

Counting the number of course hours taken, or even baccalaureate degrees produced, cannot possibly measure a university’s success in the same way that understanding the meaning of being able to attain an Aggie ring does. This self-sustaining tradition is a measure of the strength of the bond between students and an institution committed to excellence.

Traditions and rituals that uphold and direct action towards excellence are pervasive at the best universities and carry tremendous weight on university campuses. Even traditions in intercollegiate athletics can have academic value when they strengthen the university community. In fact, the most successful intercollegiate athletics programs in public universities reside at universities that are academically successful.

Traditions and behaviors that mark rites of passage, attainment of community membership, and other aspects of citizenship are most pronounced at strong academic institutions. For example, some institutions recognize teaching and research excellence by providing membership in the club of other peer recognized teachers and scholars. Membership in those clubs is marked by rings, watches, certificates, compensation, and public recognition.

At our universities, the best faculty, staff, and students will work tirelessly to attain a tradition of excellence if leadership holds it as an aspiration. Absent that, nothing related to performance matters. Rituals and traditions bind students, faculty, staff, and alumni to a common mission that is greater than any individual member of their community.

Traditions are a matter of created institutional culture, not an accident, and never an accessory.