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Our Universities: Habit, Tradition, Culture

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Our Universities: Habit, Tradition, Culture

Traditions, good and bad, are difficult to dislodge once in place. Change in universities occurs at glacial velocity. The nature of a university, like the character of a community, is determined, in large part, by its traditions and habits.

“All lasting change is incremental, based on unfolding traditions and developing institutions. Revolutionary upheavals may change how the world looks but seldom change the way the world works. Lasting historical change comes not through tidal waves but through the irresistible creeping tide.”

Richard Nixon

All universities have traditions. Traditions are an institutional version of habits, but with a particular feature. Traditions are habits that carry meanings that are shared by the members of the institutional community.

Stephen R. Covey, in ***The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People***, addressed the way habits lead people to principles of character that create success. However, there is a shadowy side to habits and traditions that may lead to ineffectiveness and undermine quality.

If, forty years ago, a university laid out a plan to eliminate merit pay increases, it would have been met with stiff resistance. People would have recognized that such a plan was ill-conceived and, in a few generations, would lower the reputation and ultimately the productivity of the institution.

However, by incrementally “expanding” the standard of what is considered acceptable, we have reached a point where work that yields excellent results is treated in exactly the same fashion as work that demonstrates nothing like excellence. If all pies must be divided equally, excellence is irrelevant, and what once would have been considered “embarrassing, but recoverable” has now been reframed as “acceptable,” or, even more damagingly, as “expected.” The best and brightest are intolerant when mere longevity supplants a demonstrated ability to produce superior work as the basis for advancement and reward in an organization.

Given a chance, quality can become a tradition as surely as a marching band, a bonfire, or a homecoming. But where leadership and employees value seniority above performance, a tradition of minimizing effort will develop. Protecting jobs at the expense of rewarding performance will guide a university to second-rate academic standing. With the slightest wind-driven whiff, students and their families get the scent of decay. The

smell of ineptness by faculty, staff, and students drives committed people away. Those who respect education will choose to work and study where a challenging intellectual environment is the norm rather than an exception. A tradition, not an anomaly.

Alumni become engaged when they see faculty members pursuing new ideas, pushing the bounds of their fields, and stoking the fire in the bellies of a new generation of graduates. A tradition of excellence can become infectious on a campus where departments recognize each other as resources of inspiration and skills, rather than just competitors for funds.

In fact, even the towns that surround universities are either elevated by a school's tradition of excellence . . . or diminished by low standards. To be sure, the mediocrity in a school tarnishes the reputation of all parties affiliated with it, including alumni who clamor for the pride excellence produces.

Mud-filled ruts along university sidewalks, propagated by employees who can't be bothered to respect the grounds, cause students to perceive habits of complacency, neglect, and disregard. By suggesting that things done on campus don't warrant taking the time to do well, the expectations students have for the value of History 101 are likewise denigrated. If that correlation is not appreciated by university leaders and workers, they have already given themselves over to complacency, a cell in the penitentiary of low expectations.

The most troubling result of a habit that doesn't honor excellence is the way it becomes reflected in the values of students. Meager expectations lead to an accommodating life view that saps the creativity and energy that sustains our nation culturally, artistically, and economically.

A pervasive tradition of achievement is a precious asset. Thankfully, a small spark of fire can be nurtured, providing light pushing into retreat the darkness of low expectation. High expectations held by members of the community create pride and anticipation, making citizenship rewarding.

And in our universities, just as human traditions of community and culture first developed around campfires of old, by giving meaning to a tradition of excellence, we fuel the fires around which our universities and our society grow. Ineffectiveness, tolerated or rewarded, is cold water on brilliance.