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Our Universities: Campuses and Systems

University systems are political organizations. Universities are academic organizations. The two coexist symbiotically only with determined leadership.

In a speech opening the legislative session, House Speaker Dean Cannon said Florida's public university system is "racing toward the middle," a hodgepodge of schools with no clear mission and overlapping agendas.

The Miami Herald, 3.6.12

The University of Illinois is at it again.

Michael Hogan and other system heads lead best when they leave the intellectual life of each campus in the hands of a campus leader and faculty. These lines of demarcation are critical, and, when they are blurred, systems and campuses suffer. Taxpayers and students soon follow with pain and anxiety.

A university system's primary role is to simplify and explicate the relationship between higher education institutions and the elected leadership of the state. While the best system leaders usually earn their stripes as academics, as system leaders they don't participate in the day to day processes of university life, academic or otherwise.

People don't cheer for systems. People cheer for campuses. A university system never has a Chief Illiniwek to defend or depose.

Bobby Knight reminded me once that he had a sign behind his desk that read, "**What part of 'NO' don't you understand.**" He was a leader. He understood that he made decisions, not a committee. Have you ever seen a committee throw a chair? It won't work. For better or worse, in clear-headedness or a fog of commitment powered by brilliance or dullness, leadership is the act of a passionate individual. I call this the Knight Imperative.

The distinction between a university campus and a university system is often lost in translation. Anyone who says he/she attended the University of Illinois means Urbana-Champaign. If they attended one of the two other campuses they would so indicate with the modifier, "Chicago" or Springfield." Unless they wanted to confuse the listener into thinking that they attended the flagship instead of one of the other excellent campuses in the system. This is particularly perplexing in states where there is not a consistent use of the moniker "president" and "chancellor". A system CEO is not the same as a campus CEO no matter the titling nomenclature, I recall something about "serving two masters." Confusion is never positive in any organizational culture, from inside or outside.

A university has a single faculty, a basketball team, and one alumni organization. An institution with more than one of any of these is not a university but a university system. To be sure these are arcane topics, but they are critical to understanding the genesis of some of the challenges that face complex multi-institutional systems. The Knight Imperative is in play.

University system leadership is driven by politics. In well-functioning multi-university systems, this is acknowledged. The University of Texas System has a Board of Regents that understands that it has one system leader, in this case Chancellor Francisco G. Cigarroa, who reports to the Board of Regents (trustees) appointed by the Governor. That chancellor has fifteen university presidents who report to him. He does not do their jobs, nor they his.

I am not disparaging system leaders. It's essential for a system leader to have a different perspective than a campus principal. A collection of universities is not a McCormick Reaper with interchangeable parts...redundancy equals inefficiency. While taxpayers look to system leaders for effectiveness, these same citizens, as parents, students, and business people, hold different expectations for campus leaders.

The Knight Imperative demands one leader per organization. You never know when you might have to throw a chair. The coach can lead the point guard, but when the clock is ticking, the point guard leads the team. It's too late for the coach when the ball is in play. The Knight Imperative affects any seat (chair) of learning, commerce, faith, or industry.

Good students want engaging teachers leading class. The rest is overhead.

It is a shame that people have to pursue excellence in a morass of meddling. Oddly enough, online education delineates a marked, rigidly focused, line of communication between teacher and student, albeit over an internet connection. At the University of Illinois, 160 faculty members, including some of the most distinguished on campus, had to sign a letter to make the simple point that Bobby Knight and the University of Phoenix seem to understand well.

No wonder the University of Phoenix seems to soar in this season of confusion in higher education.