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Our Universities: The Blame Game

Unsuccessful in meeting an aspiration? Easy, find somebody to blame. The challenging thing to do, individually and corporately, is to understand self and ability, purpose and action in such a way there is never a need to blame anyone for anything. That is leadership.

Don't blame the marketing department. The buck stops with the chief executive.

John D. Rockefeller

It is common in a time of crisis or predicament for many leaders to look for someone to point a finger at. Leadership not.

The Gulf oil spill off the coast of Louisiana in April, 2010, is a fitting example. In the wake of this disaster, principals from the three companies involved, as well as multiple state and national luminaries sought to blame up, blame down, or blame away, any responsibility for the mess. The blame game flourished.

This spill was epic and the finger-pointing at the end looked like a convention of traffic cops on steroids gone haywire, flailing and pointing this way and that: Anything to obfuscate the flow of responsibility.

Unfortunately, as student debt mounts, completion rates sink, and time to degree inflates, leaders of universities, unions, national, state and local government are all desperately searching for scapegoats. Only fools buy the charade. The culture and environment contributing to the nation's first real crisis in higher education is more complex than simple "blame gaming" allows.

It is not uncommon to hear university leadership wail, moan, and gnash its teeth at the statehouses for reduced appropriations, the Feds for shriveling Pell Grants, and private lenders turning off the spigots of cash flow.

To be sure, there is plenty of blame to go around. Some universities have employment levels that exceed reason, driven by tradition, formally lavish resource availability, blind oversight, inherent unwillingness/inability to cut anything, and pervasive patronage.

It's also apparent that some universities are working their way out of the fiscal morass. Public-private partnerships are nurtured. Student recruitment and retention are energized ensuring effectiveness and timely completion. Thoughtful universities are increasing admission standards and encouraging ill-prepared and underprepared students to attend community colleges for skill acquisition and tune-ups. All of these

efforts are laudable. However, when leadership plays the blame game, a number of negative consequences prevail.

According to Nathanael Fast in a Harvard Business Review blog post from May 13, 2010, *"How to Stop the Blame Game"* reveals a simple truth: *"A deep set of research shows that people who blame others for their mistakes lose status, learn less, and perform worse relative to those who own up to their mistakes. Research also shows that the same applies for organizations. Groups and organizations with a rampant culture of blame have a serious disadvantage when it comes to creativity, learning, innovation, and productive risk-taking."*

Nathanael Fast -- a quick study -- is right. Accepting responsibility empowers university people and the students they serve.

The most troubling aspect of the blame game is that it is endemic. When a deep infestation of blame taints an institution, a form of lethargy caused by the fear of being the target of a pointed finger leads to destructive inaction.

This is the bane of blame.

Soon, new ideas and constructive criticism are crushed under a pervasive fear of retribution rather than rewarded as positive risk-taking. Employees, who should be the way out of challenging circumstances, become jail keepers. They swallow the keys to freedom by withholding their insight and intellect.

Who can blame them?

Robert I. Sutton and Larissa Tiedens, on faculty at Stanford, provide strong empirical evidence of the power of the blame game to wreak havoc. It curses the culture of corporations and communities.

Leaders, unsure of themselves through lack of experience, intellectual acuity, or self-confidence, seek a donkey on which to pin the tail. Unfortunately, accepted political behavior oozes into other settings. Low self-esteem leaders blame others for inability in the face of a crisis but rarely share credit for institutional success, except perfunctorily.

Someone said, *"When something works well, find a person to give the credit to. When something fails, immediately accept responsibility."* Someone was right.

In our universities, the paucity of resources to accomplish mission is not going away.

Good institutions, with smart leaders, will find the institutional will to act rather than simply blame gaming. Leaders who want to hide behind perforated shields of irresponsibility and finger pointing will run out of fingers and targets, as institutions continue to miss the mark.