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Our Universities: Image, Reputation and Babble

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Our Universities: Image, Reputation and Babble

A university earns a reputation through thousands of acts of diligence from faculty and staff of every kind at every level. Clean toilets to good governance. Image cannot be persuaded into existence with a single effort, but is the result of countless deeds over an extended period of time.

It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.

Benjamin Franklin

Universities compete to create positive image in an effort to strengthen reputation thereby attracting more students to pay the ever-increasing freight for faculty and staff salaries, physical plant, pensions and insurance, food, fuel, and maintenance.

Some universities suffer reputation damage for indiscretion in intercollegiate athletics: Penn State. Other institutions attempt to rebuild image after political patronage has affected integrity: The University of Illinois. Or misguided academic ranking scams: Emory. Yet others suffer from vacant value systems stoked by things like presidential plagiarism. Integrity deficits dog institutions: Honor and duty give in to position, power and self, and it is serious business

But, pilfering (that's what plagiarism is, taking what's not yours), by university presidents unique and gravely shatters images. For example Richard L. Judd, President of Central Connecticut State University was accused of plagiarism. William A. Meehan, President of Jacksonville State University in Alabama likewise had the charge directed at him. So did Danny Lovett, Tennessee Temple University's seventh president. All had real, perceivable impact on individual and institutional reputation.

The charges, definitions, and contorted processes of insinuation and investigation are enough. After levied, rightness matters not. Absent integrity is the working assumption.

The student newspaper at the University Illinois, the *Daily Illini* posted an April 30, 2012, editorial commenting on Chancellor Phyllis Wise's project "*Visioning Future Excellence at Illinois.*" They were tough on Chancellor Wise in questioning the value of a 20 to 50 year stone-toss on how the University might address "society's most pressing issues."

However, this is wise worthy work.

But the editorial board opined that, "*The University isn't going to find solutions to these problems by counting how many times these terms are used in a visioning session.*" Their argument appears to be on process, rather than substance and value. A wise priest once told me process is substance. Maybe?

But wait.

Their concerns were that fidelity failings expressed in the College of Law's admission scandals and ethical challenges for former President Michael Hogan and his Chief of Staff Lisa Troyer, added logs to the smoldering fire formerly in full-flame during the admissions scandal of 2009 precipitating the resignation of Joseph White, then President and Richard Herman, then Chancellor.

Paraphrasing the Psalmist David ... "out of the mouths of babes." Babes only for a student's limited experience in higher education leadership -- not for tenacity or insight-- comes the single suggestion that fixes every image and reputational issue that any university is faced with.

University quality lay not in planning, marketing or image babble. Rather, the earnest editorialists crystallized this thought, "...*we may have a fighting chance if we focus our efforts on recruiting the right talent that eventually may affect change.*"

These astute neophytes recognize what many leaders and influence groups don't.

Universities are about people, and when they are led, managed, attended to, cared for, and nurtured by people with high talent and high integrity they prosper. Ralph Waldo Emerson is falsely credited with saying "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door," but whoever said it was spot on.

This simple observation of the *Daily Illini* is "right as rain," as Max Beerbohm observed when image and reality coalesced in the mirror in *Yet Again*. It applies equally to presidents, and janitors; clerical workers, craft workers, and most importantly; faculty.

Faculty members create the most lasting impact, image and influence. Many would not like this characterization as miniature "Mad Men", but in fact they are the marketing plan, program, vision, and vessel, that make the biggest impact.

Good university students and families are just like the editorial board at the *Daily Illini*: They can smell a rat. If the university talks one thing and walks something else, worthy students seeking honest challenge and enlightenment run...backpacks bulging with intelligence, commitment, cash, Pell Grants and subsidized loans.

Compassionate, motivated, challenging people, teaching aspiring students make a university work. The editors had it right, "...*focus our efforts on recruiting the right talent.*"

The rest: Just overhead at our universities; and too frequently, babble.