

7-29-2011

Our Universities: Faulty Leadership

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: Faulty Leadership" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 108.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/108

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: Faulty Leadership

Leaders learn, or leaders fail. The basis of all effective leadership is as powerful as the Boy Scout Law. Its simplicity and timelessness do not diminish its value. Ward doesn't add to it, but strengthens it.

"We must be silent before we can listen. We must listen before we can learn. We must learn before we can prepare. We must prepare before we can serve. We must serve before we can lead."

William Arthur Ward

Our universities need the best leadership they can get. There are a number of traits that mark excellent university leaders and, in fact, leaders of any enterprise. This sometimes leads to the mistaken notion that a great leader in business, politics, industry or military life will also make a great university leader.

While the foundations of leadership are similar, the particularities of it are different in different settings, and effective university leaders must have academic values that are honed in classrooms, laboratories, studios and offices, where the craft of teaching and scholarly work is perfected. There are no substitutes for that experience. The core mission of the university happens in those settings and nowhere else.

Michael Jensen, professor emeritus at Harvard University and chairman of the social Science Electronic Publishing, Inc., addressed the graduating class at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown this year. He made some powerful comments on life, leadership and the foundations for each.

Universities must prepare successive generations of students to meet the evolving needs of society, which requires that the methods they use to meet their missions must be adaptable. In this environment of shifting sands, they must be able to dig down to the bedrock of integrity, authenticity and a commitment to something bigger than one's self to provide a solid foundation from which to raise a temple of knowledge.

If university leadership does not exhibit these traits, their absence makes it almost impossible to meet their fundamental mission. And while the lack any of these three characteristics can cause any organizational leadership to falter, it assures failure in the university setting.

In the business of universities no two products - the amount or degree of changed thought - are identical because each student starts from a different position and perspective, and requires different actions to effect change.

Integrity lives in actions that place the interests of society above any personal agenda in guiding the institution. I am not so naïve as to say that personal interest is ignored, but rather that it must take a back seat to the public interest. The news is filled with

examples of university presidents who have placed personal gain above the interest of the university and the students they serve. Recently, at West Virginia University, questions arose over a degree awarded to a “connected” individual under the leadership of President Mike Garrison -- a non-traditional university leader who had strong connections to elected officials but modest commitment to the university mission and a substantive lack of university experience as a teacher or scholar.

Seth Godin’s take on authenticity surfaces on his blog, *Authenticity, for me, is doing what you promise, not "being who you are". That's because 'being' is too amorphous and we are notoriously bad at judging that. Internal vision is always blurry. Doing, on the other hand, is an act that can be seen by all.*

In *"Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters,"* Barbara Kellerman identifies seven kinds of toxicity - a phrase first coined by Marcia Walker - that exist in leadership. Incompetence, rigidity, intemperance, callousness, corruption, insularity, and evil are all functions of the absence of authenticity. They can arise from the frailty of individuals. But they also can be institutionalized by the carelessness of people who don’t understand the complexity of the environment over which they have been given charge.

Adlai E. Stevenson made this observation on commitment in education: *Respect for intellectual excellence, the restoration of vigor and discipline to our ideas of study, curricula which aim at strengthening intellectual fiber and stretching the power of young minds, personal commitment and responsibility - these are the preconditions of educational recovery in America today; and, I believe, they have always been the preconditions of happiness and sanity for the human race.*

Imagine that!

The absence of integrity, authenticity and commitment in the halls of university leadership keeps our universities from adequately serving either their students or the greater public.