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The Presidency

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Our Universities: The Presidency

University presidents carry a moral burden to act with integrity. When they don't, universities suffer and communities, students, and alumni pay the price.

"...for what is a share of a man worth? If he does not contain the quality of integrity, he is worthless. If he does, he is priceless. The value is either nothing or is infinite."

Elbert Tuttle, *Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit*

Little has more impact on the learning environment for students, the working environment for faculty and staff, and the service environment for the communities and states where universities are located than ethical leadership, or lack thereof, exerted by the president. And university leadership has economic impact in host communities. Five great and prosperous college towns: Amherst, MA; Ann Arbor, MI; Athens, GA; College Station, TX; and Berkeley, CA, all have extended histories of bold, insightful presidential leadership. Admittedly, these are special towns, but in any university community the president exerts force, for better or worse.

An April 12, 2013, *Library Journal* entry suggests that college presidencies are in shambles. University personnel, students, families, donors, and alumni look for bold and decisive leadership from university presidents and rarely find it. At Rutgers the basketball coach ran amok; at Penn State, the football program lost all moral credibility and integrity; and at Emory University the books were cooked for an edge in national ranking systems, lying about test scores and other characteristics of university quality; these few notorious examples lead to, or follow from, a lack of integrity of presidential leadership. Each case begs the question: Is the credibility of university leadership evaporating?

The helm wants the absent helmsman.

Tears in the fabric of integrity in universities come internally, from executive leadership, not from outside forces. The statehouses, tough economic times, declining enrollments, lack of community support, all may make the job challenging, but don't compel leaders to violate the West Point Honor Code, "*A cadet [president] will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do.*" Presidents decide to own or shed integrity.

Lapses of veracity are exercised for personal or institutional benefit... unseemly in either case, and fueled by avarice in both. At Rutgers, when the basketball coach behaved in a despicable way, it seemed the concern of university leadership was damage control rather than the student athletes, or the example set. It is patently clear that subterfuge was the case at Penn State. The fear of the lost dollar or diminished power ruled and integrity suffered.

The ethical framework, or lack of one, allows impropriety in any quarter to creep into academic decision-making in every quarter. And the bright light of 24/7 news and Internet availability of every form of commentary makes hiding the truth a delusion of the past. These conditions, coupled with intense political

pressure -- especially at state institutions -- cause university presidents to hide in the dark shadows of our ivy-covered halls. In many cases, presidents are afraid to lead as leadership will always bring about resistance from some corner of the campus or community.

Steven Bell points out in the *Library Journal* that university presidents are often ruled by fear with this query: "When was the last time a college or university president produced an edgy piece of commentary, or took a daring stand on a contentious manner?" It's hard to find a university leader willing to risk the danger of a contentious position, yet supposed leaders are willing to cover up malfeasance -- personal and corporate -- while denying the consequences of such behavior on academic quality, students, campus life, and the community.

Our universities need determined presidential leadership. University presidents have been, and continue to be, a moral force on campus and in town: a positive moral force by encouraging and expecting integrity and academic excellence in all decisions or, conversely, a negative moral force by demonstrating behaviors of selfishness and personal gain as the roots of all action.

You can't have it both ways: It's either worthless or priceless. Judge Tuttle was astute.