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Our Universities: Place and Culture

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Our Universities: Place and Culture

Fifth in a series on Corporate Culture...

Where we work shapes us, our work, and those we work with. Places create culture.

“I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him.”

Abraham Lincoln

Organizations, like trees, have roots. Roots tie people to places. Geography and buildings impact the culture of an organization. The Catholic Church outside of Rome, Islam without Mecca, and Hewlett-Packard outside Silicon Valley are difficult to imagine. Parings provide frameworks. It's a two-way street too: Detroit without Chrysler is not easy to envision.

Some leaders have dubbed college campuses dinosaurs: Among them, James Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan and early prophet of the impact that distance learning would have on higher education. President Duderstadt was correct in every respect except one: Campuses of research universities will not wither. For research universities the power of place will multiply because of the Internet, not in spite of it. The campus as a signpost of academic energy and a means to collect a critical mass of faculty and students increases the value of buildings in a place rather than degrades them. This is where culture resides.

John Coleman, in a *Harvard Business Review* piece “*Place Makes Culture*,” addresses the importance of work environments. The interactive environments of **Pixar** and Mayor Bloomberg's New York City Hall are cited as exemplary. These institutions thrive on human interaction. The different natures — one artistic and highly technical, the other pragmatic and highly political — testify to the pervasive impact of place on culture. Organizations create, sustain, and promote high-impact human interaction intentionally to create a culture.

It is likely that the University of Phoenix will not reach whatever potential it has until it acquires a university campus. Without a place it is symbol sans substance: a skyrocket going nowhere. But a campus with lecture halls, libraries, classrooms, laboratories, studios, and theaters, where a culture is created and sustained by engaged people, promotes ideas and learning.

Writing in *Entrepreneur*, Robert McCarthy suggests troubles that warn of cultural collapse: high turnover, late departure and early arrival to and from work, low

attendance at company events, and a lack of honest communication about mission and purpose, all flowing from a weakening corporate culture in workplaces. Places.

The culture and habits of an organization are defined by the climates and habits that create patterns, according to Kermit Burley of ***Demand Media***. Edgar Schein concurs in ***Organizational Culture and Leadership***. Artifacts and place of business – what you see – affect productivity and effectiveness, says Schein, a noted organizational scholar from MIT's ***Sloan School of Management***. Furthermore, he states emphatically that leadership itself is defined in part by the artifacts and the place of business.

For universities, positive relationships between campus and community impact the culture of both. Eastern Kentucky University and the city of Richmond are cited as an example of a positive working culture by Kim Griffo, Executive Director of ***The International Town and Gown Association***. Moreover, the 26 Jesuit colleges in the United States have had a sustained and positive impact on the communities in which they are located, according to a ***New York Times*** piece by Jacques Steinberg, ***“Which Colleges make the Best neighbors?”***

In our universities the work culture creates value. The university is not a business, but it must be business-like. In the world of commerce, according to ***“Great Places to Work 2013,”*** the annualized stock returns for ***Fortune 500*** companies identified as great places to work was 10.8% last year, compared to ***Standard and Poor's*** top 500 list of 4.5%. I hear the whisper in my ear, ***“Profit and quality are not equal.”*** I know.

But in our universities effectiveness and the environment that create and sustain culture are knotted together and create the potential for excellence, and for Mr. Lincoln's pride. I know that too.