

Essay 10: Thoughts on Integrity

I know that all my readers are honest and have the highest standards of integrity. Nevertheless, the purpose of this essay is to scare you a bit. Higher education is not as squeaky clean as it sometimes appears. Higher education has had its share of scandals, and not just admissions “consultants” bribing university folks.

Perhaps it does not fit your demeanor to be stern, but, nevertheless, I recommend it. I recommend that, while you may smile and welcome people into your office, you cultivate a mean reputation. I guess I’m good at it. (I sew. My mother taught me the ins and outs of using a sewing machine because, as she said, “You’re too mean to ever get married.” I now own a serger and can alter my wife’s dresses. Nevertheless, my mother was wrong. I have been married several times.)

I have had a long career in higher education, twenty-five years of which I spent as a chief finance and administrative officer. I would like to think that because of my mean reputation, I have never been offered a bribe. Nevertheless, as I mentioned in Essay 5, I have fired thieves, embezzlers, and fighters. I fired a man for asking a contractor to submit multiple bids on a project on different company letterheads to avoid our bid requirements. (The contractor was honest enough to tell me.)

I was the mean guy that the Western Association of Schools and Colleges brought in from New York for accreditation visits to schools suspected of integrity violations. As a team we asked a board to fire a president for hiding millions of dollars in losses in a private corporation. (It was Enron ten years before there was an Enron.) We withdrew accreditation from a college that was giving course credits to students who never took the courses and, in fact, never entered the country. We withdrew accreditation from a college that, among other violations, had a board so divided that they had elected two, competing presidents.

On a project for the National Science Foundation, I found that one university was filing false research personnel surveys, counting graduate student researchers, clearly disallowed in the instructions, because the president wanted the university to qualify for AAU status.

Even institutional researchers have known pressure from presidents to show numbers that flatter their reigns.

Integrity means more than just standing against dishonesty. It also means understanding your principles and sticking to them. It may mean that you must begin looking for another job when you are the finance person and another vice president goes millions over budget without a thought of working with you to find

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the funds, knowing there would be no sanction from the president. It may mean that you must begin looking for another job when your president allows a board member to impose a new system that the board member happens to use in their business or that they have heard of from a friend.

Presidents must avoid the appearance of impropriety. They cannot charge personal expenses to college credit cards or the college foundation, even though they “intend to reimburse the college.” I can see the headlines. I HAVE seen the headlines.

Associate registrars have been known to sell grade “improvements.” I’ve been acting head of external affairs for that one. We took fast, but fair, action. I told reporters the facts. I looked stern and intolerant. The headlines were not good, but we survived. There was nothing more to say than that we caught it with improved systems. We were glad that we had tightened things when we first had the opportunity. I thought it important to emphasize that we never assumed that all employees were perfectly honest. We keep putting systems in place to protect the integrity of our work.

That’s what systems are for. We found the grade discrepancy when we added a monthly run that compared historical grades against current grades. Cash systems are always tight but can be fooled when the person running the system colludes with the person handling the cash. While systems are great for run-of-the-mill problems, internal auditors are necessary to catch collusion and the more sophisticated challenges. I love internal auditors.

Some administrators are uncomfortable with internal auditors, especially when they represent the head office in a system. I was never uncomfortable. I gave them nice offices to do their work. I encouraged them. I asked everyone to give them full cooperation. External auditors are good, but much of their work is pro forma. (They completely failed with the “Enron” University.) An internal auditor can dig deeply into the data and records.

Higher education will not survive the coming enrollment and relevance crunch with a dismal reputation. We have a burden in that we in higher education are regarded as being a castle of integrity, very much different than garbage collection, highway contractors, and building inspection. We are better, but we are not perfect. We have higher standards and attract people less inclined to search for a shortcut to riches. But higher standards are not perfection. Don’t be blind to abuse. Assume the possibility. Push for better systems. Support internal auditors. Save yourself!

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