

The Chronicle of Higher Education

From the issue dated July 13, 2001

We Need Excellence Beyond the Classroom

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Just before graduation day, a student and his family gathered eagerly around the dining-room table to open a letter from the university that the student attended. The student began to read to all assembled what they hoped would be a note of congratulations from the dean.

The letter read: "Dear Student, Your diploma will be withheld because of an outstanding parking violation. In order to receive your diploma, you are required to first satisfy this obligation." It was signed "The Parking Department."

Stories like this are all too common -- and are symptoms of a fundamental problem at many higher-education institutions today.

Higher education is an indispensable sector of society, and American teaching and scholarship are emulated the world over. But given that, why has public funding for higher education generally been flat in recent years? Why do students, parents, alumni, employers, journalists, taxpayers, and other external stakeholders perpetually question us? Why, in short, don't our constituencies support us more actively?

The answer is that we too narrowly define the concept of excellence to which we aspire. We strive for excellence in teaching and research -- and we often achieve it. But we fall considerably short in two other dimensions of quality: service excellence and organizational excellence. And the responsibility for both the failure and the fix sits squarely on the shoulders of every one of us who works on a campus.

Service excellence concerns the way we create and maintain relationships with those we serve through our instruction, research, and community outreach. The story about the student and the parking ticket illustrates the challenges of service excellence. Unfortunately, most campus cultures are much more effective and efficient in matters of regulation and control than in relationship development. The issue in the parking-ticket case is not whether the student should meet his financial responsibilities to the institution but rather how we communicate those obligations so that we don't undermine our larger goals.

There are many other examples. Consider, for instance, the faculty member who is in her office preparing lecture material when a student arrives at her door with a question. The faculty member reacts to the interruption with visible annoyance and tells the student to come back during office hours. The professor is working hard to maintain her college's reputation for scholarly excellence. Unfortunately, at the same time, she is making a less exemplary contribution to service excellence.

Similar incidents occur every day at institutions of high academic quality. Such events are remembered, and, unfortunately, it does not take many of them to sour our relationships with others. Yes, there are also many good stories. My own research and that of the Technical Assistance Research Program of the White House Office of Consumer Affairs shows that people recall and repeat stories about negative events much more often than they remember and recount positive ones. That means that such encounters have a disproportionately large impact on the public image and reputation of our departments, our institutions, and higher education in general.

The fundamental problem is our lack of consistency. We go to great lengths to assess and document the quality of our academic work; we thoroughly and painstakingly review our teaching and research programs and the accomplishments of individual faculty members. But we have never really dedicated ourselves, as institutions or as a sector, to service excellence -- certainly not to the extent that we have dedicated ourselves to excellence in academics. We don't think or talk much about service, we rarely assess how well we do it, and we do little to recognize or reward it in ways that would make it part of our institutional culture.

We follow a similar pattern in matters of organizational excellence that concern the effectiveness and efficiency of the way we work. For example, at many institutions, gaining the necessary approvals to offer a new course is often lengthy, cumbersome, and frustrating. Sometimes faculty members must review the same proposal several times because they serve as members of different oversight committees or groups. Or to cite another case in point: At many universities, reimbursement for travel can take one, two, or even three months from the time that you submit the paperwork until you receive a check. In contrast, if you work at some leading corporations, you can file your travel expenses from anywhere in the world by phone and receive a check within 48 hours at your home or bank, or in your American Express account.

The dysfunctional work processes that pervade higher-education institutions waste time and other valuable resources, thwart faculty and staff innovation, and undermine morale. In many cases, they also interfere with our ability to serve our external constituencies effectively.

The health-care sector provides an object lesson. In the past, health-care providers focused exclusively on clinical quality, but today many primary-care practices also emphasize issues of service and organizational effectiveness. They offer evening and weekend hours, designate staff to help patients process insurance claims, and encourage feedback about their services. Moreover, many health-care organizations have recognized that such changes aren't just about appearances. They are fundamental to the quality of care.

Research in the medical area shows that how caregivers treat patients influences how those patients understand and comply with their medical treatment -- and also increases the likelihood that patients will take responsibility for managing their own health care. Similarly, the way that we deal with our students and our other stakeholders affects not only how they value us as "providers," but also our ability to help them learn, make productive use of their knowledge, and become self-motivated lifelong learners.

We need a new, broader vision of excellence -- one that attaches far greater value to relational

and organizational considerations. What's required is not simply improved public relations, but a fresh look at what excellence in higher education means. We should:

Examine the needs and perceptions of those we serve. As individuals and institutions, we must develop a better understanding of how our various constituencies view us. At a minimum, we should gather information on their expectations, priorities, and level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with our programs and services. For example, various departments could institute a regular program of focus groups and surveys of students and alumni to solicit their assessments and suggestions for improvement.

With new insights, we could identify important gaps between how we think we are performing and how our constituencies perceive us. In some cases, those gaps will indicate that we need to explain more effectively why we've acted as we have. In other cases, they will suggest that we need to make changes in what we do or how we do it. For example, an academic-department survey indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with the department's advising program. Follow-up focus groups revealed that much of the problem was not the absence of a viable advising system, but rather that students were not well informed about the system and how to take advantage of it.

Become more effective learning organizations. When I talk with colleagues in academic and administrative units, I hear a great deal about how each department, school, or discipline is special. Indeed, every unit is unique in some respects. But many similarities also exist that provide the potential for learning from others. All organizations, in all sectors, serve specific constituencies. All organizations need to clarify their mission and build consensus for it, to identify constituent needs, to improve and assess their effectiveness, and to use technology to support their goals.

For example, recently the Rutgers undergraduate admissions office sought to improve how prospective students could learn the status of their applications, without having to employ a large, dedicated staff to answer phones. To whom did the admissions officers look for a model? Other colleges and universities, of course. But they weren't handling matters any more efficiently than we were.

As it turned out, what was needed was the approach used by leading corporations to solve problems of this type: to think generically and identify the fundamental processes involved. Thinking generically led us to realize that the "admissions-records problem" should instead be considered a "tracking problem." What organization best tracks its products and services? Probably Federal Express. Now our admissions office has a Web-based tracking system for prospective students that embodies most of the same features as the FedEx package-tracking process. Who would have thought that a university could learn from a delivery service?

Our focus on how we are different is often a barrier to organizational learning. To the extent that we are unique, we have nothing to learn from anyone -- not exactly the posture one would hope for in a sector where teaching, learning, and discovery are core values.

Study and improve our internal operations. Every college unit needs to analyze and improve how it functions. How well do our teaching methods work? How effective are our professional development efforts? Our financial systems?

Higher education is the gold standard in research, and we have subject-matter experts available on every imaginable topic. Yet we have not been committed to consistently high standards when it comes to "R & D" for our own internal organizational processes. Should we not also use our expertise to examine our own operations?

For example, one of the most obvious kinds of internal R & D is to analyze work processes to clarify and streamline the sequence of steps required to accomplish a goal. In one Rutgers department, clarifying the responsibilities of the dean and the chairman in hiring new faculty members substantially reduced the number of days involved in negotiations. It also eliminated the ambiguities, miscommunication, and ill will that had been characteristics of the hiring process in that department for years.

Recognize that everyone at the institution is a teacher. Clearly, students gain important knowledge in the classroom. But they are also being taught poignant and enduring lessons outside the classroom. Seeing a faculty member or staff member courteously and professionally deal with an angry colleague or student can provide at least as poignant a lesson on human relations as any series of assigned readings on the topic.

We are all teachers and learners -- not only full and part-time faculty members and teaching assistants, but also each and every staff member. Many of us teach in dormitories, dining halls, administrative offices, and on campus buses. We teach through every interaction we have with those who live on and work on the campus, with visitors, and with the general public. We must remember that we are all the face of higher education.

In sum, colleges should consider a variety of ways to improve the quality of our services and relationships with our constituents and how we function internally as organizations. The traditional scholarly goals of higher-education institutions are of paramount importance. But if we are to fulfill our teaching and learning role in society, and be recognized for doing so, we can't be content being a leader in scholarly excellence alone. We must demand more of our institutions and ourselves.

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