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Scandals follow hubris in higher education

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Letters from Academia

One of the most common physiological effects of climbing mountains is dizziness due to the lack of sufficient oxygen. This is known as altitude sickness and is why mountaineers not only go well prepared for this kind of expedition, but also they never go alone. They make sure that they are accompanied by experienced climbers so the lack of oxygen does not generate, among other things, hallucinations that can be fatal.

Something similar can be said of certain people who reach high positions in life, positions for which they are not fully prepared. Just the sensation of being at the heights of an institution makes them hallucinate and make fatal mistakes.

Just a couple of weeks ago the University of Akron announced that its president, Scott Scarborough, and the university board of trustees had "mutually agreed" that he should step down after less than two years as the head of the institution.

What happened there is becoming more and more common in academia. Many factors have been putting tremendous pressure on its leaders to solve big problems for which they are not usually prepared.

Akron is a public institution of about 26,000 students with several campuses in Ohio. It has a great reputation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas, although it has a number of other units such as schools of law, music, and colleges of business, education, and health professions, all of them of good quality.

Despite these solid foundations the university has been facing a number of challenges lately. When Scarborough became president two years ago, UA was confronting budget deficits caused by excessive expenditures in building construction and decreased enrollment. He proposed a $50-per-credit-hour course fee that attracted a lot of negative attention. The state had set a budget that included a tuition freeze for higher education, and this move was seen by many as a tuition increase in disguise. Scarborough was questioned by state legislators and the chancellor of the Ohio Department of Higher Education, John Carey. The fee was later rescinded by the trustees.

Scarborough also tried to deal with the budget issue by terminating about 200 employees, while spending nearly a million dollars to remodel the university-owned president's home. He also spent more than $800,000 in a contract with a new company called Trust Navigators, to provide "success coaches" to first-year students. In May of this year the university announced it would not renew the contract with that Cleveland company because there was not a noticeable difference in the fall-to-spring retention rate for students with the coaches, compared to the year before without them.

There were also strange edicts by Scarborough to his subordinates that included warnings about "failing to pick up trash and to maintain an orderly and clean work environment," "being late to meetings, "losing one's cool," and "inability to answer a question directly and succinctly."

He also decided to rename the university as Ohio's Polytechnic University without proper consultation and despite the fact that this is an institution that teaches many other subjects besides technical careers. Last month the university said it was no longer going by the new name.

Anyone who is knowledgeable about the culture of higher education knows that to change the name of the institution is a very risky proposition that will infuriate many alumni – usually the major donor base of any college or university. And to change a name that describes many disciplines as irrelevant to the institution is the easiest way to insult many internal constituencies.

In May 2015 Scarborough gave a speech before the Cleveland City Club where he said that given the changes he was enacting for UA that the other four-year public institutions in Ohio (Cleveland State, Kent State, Youngstown State universities and the Northeast Ohio Medical University) "may not exist in the future." All those institutions later issued a joint statement saying how offended they were that Scarborough had questioned the future of their institutions.

These and other actions by Scarborough lead to a 50-2 vote of no confidence by the university's faculty senate last February. Many in the UA community also protested the president's actions by gathering outside the board room at trustees' meetings. Scarborough never acknowledged any wrongdoing, but rather blamed the situation on "not clear enough" communication between him and the board.

Needless to say, as these stories circulated in the local and national media, many students and their parents became alarmed and the enrollment of first-year students to UA decreased by one third.

In his departing statement, Scarborough insisted that "the world is changing and we need to change," which is true, but he seemed to forget a number of things. One is that institutions of higher education are very resistant to change. Therefore, you need a lot of diplomacy and patience to achieve any change. That means that you have to involve all the constituencies that might be affected by those changes to convince them for the need for change, to listen to their advice and to implement those changes in ways that they do not see as imposed from above. Otherwise, you will fail as Scarborough did.

You also have to be very careful about behavior that can be misconstrued as silly. To tell people that they have to pick up their own trash as a presidential mandate gives the impression that your priorities are totally off the mark.

Finally, if you are in financial trouble the entire community will scrutinize each expenditure you authorize. To spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in renovations for the house that the university provides you as the president's home is one of the worst mistakes one can make.

As the political commentator David Gergen once said regarding a different situation, "We have seen the hubris. And now we're seeing the scandals."

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