

Leadership and Institutional Integrity¹

*Presented at a retreat on
Leading the Research University of the Future
Urbana, Illinois
November 21, 2014*

Larry R. Faulkner
*President Emeritus
The University of Texas at Austin*

Good morning, everyone. It is such a pleasure to be back home at Illinois and to be working with a treasured former partner, Tina Gunsalus. For a long time, I have admired Tina's creative work toward establishing a reasoned basis for ethical leadership. Equally, I have admired unshakable desire to see this great university become even better. And I am delighted to rejoin Mary Sue Coleman in a program on higher education. Let me welcome her to emerita status. Nineteen very successful years at the helm of two AAU universities is quite a record for her to celebrate. Also, I am grateful to Phyllis Wise and Ade Adesida for their imaginative leadership of this university, about which I care so much.

This is a retreat on *Leading the Research University of the Future*. It is a future-focused event, speaking in many different ways to change in higher education – driven by globalization, driven by technology, driven by the tides of history, driven by shifts in culture. Yet I have been asked to speak on the role of leadership in building institutional integrity, which, in its essential aspects, is a timeless topic, rooted deeply in human nature. To be sure, things do change over time even as one addresses institutional integrity, because cultural shifts alter values and viewpoints, because temptations come in new shapes, and because the means and techniques of human interactions evolve.

But, still, human nature is at the core of building institutional integrity, and, as the song says, “the fundamental things apply, as time goes by.”

The idea of integrity is linked closely with honesty, truthfulness, incorruptibility, trustworthiness, soundness, and honor. An individual who embodies these virtues is a man or woman of integrity. We all know some.

In our daily lives, we have to put our fates in the hands of others. Without doubt, we look for ability in those people if we are able to choose them. But we sleep better and feel greater harmony in our lives when they are also people of integrity.

¹ This text is downloadable at http://faulknerchem.com/speeches_presentations_and_writings/public_higher_education . It and other related items are components of the author's archival website (<http://faulknerchem.com>).

Able leaders with integrity are treasures indeed.

If integrity is a valued component of leadership, then integrity must also be significant to institutions, for which leadership is a central concern and in which daily relationships among colleagues are fundamental. Let me suggest that institutional integrity be defined in this way:

The ability of an institution, as seen from the outside, to remain faithful to a clear, honorable mission and to deal honestly, truthfully, and soundly with clients, investors, and citizens. And the ability of an institution, as seen from the inside, to embody honesty, truthfulness, and soundness with respect to mission in the daily work and interaction of individual members, especially including leaders at all levels.

As we talk further – and as you think further – I believe that you will find this to be a useful, practical definition of an important concept.

So let me turn now to the very issue of importance. Why, indeed, is institutional integrity a matter of central concern – a matter worthy of a sizable portion of this leadership retreat?

One needs to start with the first social purpose of institutions, which, in my perception, is to secure and to civilize the next generation.

This is a matter of existential importance for any society. While institutions might also have responsibilities for delivering an array of important services having little to do with that grand purpose – such as sustaining the aged in dignity, controlling inflation, managing air traffic, and seeing that every fall is filled with football games – no purpose bears more fully on a society’s ability to sustain itself than securing and civilizing the next generation. This is the main role of schools, colleges and universities, of arts organizations, museums, and libraries of all kinds, of churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. It should be a focus for governments, media, think tanks, and foundations. It is also an important role of ethical business and industry, if not the first role.

Our focus is on universities, of course. For the most part, when you hear the word “institution” in the remainder of this talk, you can think “university.” But you might also think about your organization within the university of which you are a part – a college or department, for example.

If institutions such as all those just mentioned are so responsible for the next generation’s security and grasp of civilization, it becomes patently clear that each institution has a high social duty to “remain faithful to [this] clear, honorable mission and to deal honestly, truthfully, and soundly with clients, investors, and citizens.” In other words, an institution must embody institutional integrity, as seen from the outside.

Besides being faithful to their mission, institutions need to be effective and efficient. They have a responsibility to function at the highest achievable level, and that brings us to the way they work on the inside.

Practically all institutions – certainly all of our universities – are complex organizations with many levels and quite a few columns of leadership. No leader can accomplish much without meriting trust from colleagues, not only above and below in the line of authority, but also laterally. And no leader can function for very long without being able to trust those same colleagues. In fact, the organization will not function effectively for long if subsequent generations of leaders cannot have confidence that promises and agreements made by their predecessors will be honored.

The very effectiveness of an institution, in an instant and over a long period, is critically dependent on the degree to which it “[embodies] honesty, truthfulness, and soundness with respect to mission in the daily work and interaction of individual members, especially including leaders at all levels” – or, in other words, on its institutional integrity, as seen from the inside.

What is riding on institutional integrity? Faithfulness of the institution to a preeminent social purpose and the effectiveness of the institution in meeting every aspect of its mission. That’s all.

This is not a matter of being genteel or having pleasant working conditions. It’s about whether you can or can’t fulfill your responsibilities toward the next generation, and whether you can really make your part of the institution work as well as it can.

Well, if it’s important, what can leadership do to influence institutional integrity? How should you, as leaders, conduct your business, so as to preserve and to improve the environment of integrity in your domain?

As I see the matter, institutional integrity is rooted in values, but embodied in custom, habit, and leadership – in the way business is done on an everyday basis and in the way that the team is focused toward goals, motivated, and supported from above.

Every leader sets standards of performance, and they have impact. Members of the organization do pay attention, and the best try to live up to expected standards (unless they think theirs are better). Think carefully about what you expect of your people as they conduct daily business – and about how you convey expectations. Here are a few related pieces of advice:

- In general, people expect too little of themselves and can live up to better. But remember that your organization is human. Calibrate what you expect such that it remains achievable with sustainable effort.
- In daily work, occasional errors will occur. Allow for them to be detected and corrected.

- But clearly signal those few critical matters, for which no margin of error can be tolerated.
- Require basic honesty and truthfulness in all business.
- Promises made should be recorded and must be kept. Unrecorded promises, especially those reported to have been made by your predecessor, are only rumors.

While standards are indeed important, they can be effective only to the extent that you yourself live up to them. There is nothing more influential in a leader – for ill or for good – than the power of example. Your standards and your example together provide your most immediate and comprehensive means for influencing integrity in your organization.

In the course of your leadership, you will also have opportunities to improve habits and customs. Your standards of performance will speak frequently to such matters. Freely pursue opportunities to change habits and customs in the interest of better standards of integrity and performance. Your organization will be enthusiastic about this sort of change, if they, too, see the opportunity in it.

Rare and gifted leaders can also have an impact on institutional identity and values – on the very core of how the institution sees itself in the ideal. In my perception, they accomplish this by being so right for their times and so effective that they become a chapter in the institutional saga.

As far as I can see, leaders like these don't become legends because they planned it all out. They did their jobs, often for a long time, in times that demanded extraordinary gifts. They set the right standards and goals, and built sound teams to deliver day after day. The product, in retrospect, was transformational.

Forget about becoming a legend. Even if you are ambitious to rise far above the ordinary among leaders, you cannot possibly succeed toward that goal without being excellent in the fundamentals and having the luck to be in times and with partners that match up to your ideas and preparation. If, in the sunset of your career, you find that extraordinary recognition and honor really did come to you, then you can draw deep satisfaction. In the meantime, that goal will be a serious distraction and impairment. It will keep you from focusing relentlessly on what is best for the institution, which is always the most important thing.

In the last part of this talk, I offer two pieces of advice for your everyday practice as an academic leader.

First, make a point of observing and thinking about human nature, but eschew cynicism. Having an effective understanding of human nature is probably more important to your success as an institutional leader than any other area of competence, simply because you can accomplish very little except by working with and through colleagues. Even if you conceive the most wonderful goals, you will never realize them without getting the members

of your organization to understand those goals, to see their value, to buy into them, to become motivated toward their realization, to be empowered with the needed resources, and to be helped through rough spots. Some of this is analytical, but not much. For the most part, it's about understanding your people.

They are not simple.

Individual people have a noble side capable of envisioning and embracing the most elegant ideals, many utterly selfless. People will live for, sacrifice for, and even die for their most cherished ideals. At the same time, each person possesses a powerful animal spirit that jealously looks out for security and well-being. Every person shows both natures, but the balance is individual, as are the specific noble motivations and animal anxieties. You will fail with your people, if you neglect either of the sides.

Finally, I repeat Mary Sue Coleman's message of last night about listening. Develop the habit and the skill of truly listening to those principally affected by your decisions. In decades of administrative work as department head, dean, provost, and president, this has been my best discovery. Fortunately, I made it early. Often one learns valuable things – sometimes new ideas or viewpoints, but more commonly subtle information that enables you to improve the details of your subsequent action. A tremendous collateral benefit is that people (remarkably, I continue to marvel) will usually accept your right to decide once you have listened, even if your decision is not with them.

But never try to fake it. People can easily tell whether you have made an effort to listen to their views.

I appreciate your attention this morning. It has been a sermon, I know. But what else can one give when asked to speak on institutional integrity?

Being chosen to leadership in one of the great institutions represented here is a signal trust. Use it well.