How a President Can Rescue, or Ruin, a College’s Reputation

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In their 1974 classic, *Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President*, Michael D. Cohen and James G. March assert, “The status of a president is apparently less dependent on the quality of his tenure as president than it is on the quality of his school. Colleges make presidents, not the reverse.” I want to argue the opposite: The reputation of an institution is, in part, a reflection of the reputation of its president. Presidential actions have an impact on how colleges are perceived.

During the first 15 years of his presidency at Pennsylvania State University, Graham Spanier was sought after as a speaker, served on numerous boards, received prestigious awards, and was known and liked throughout the higher-education community and beyond. As his reputation grew, so did Penn State’s. Then, in 2011, after 16 years in the presidency, it was reported that Spanier had for many years covered up incidents of child abuse by a university employee. After an investigation, Spanier, who denied the charges, was indicted, and the university’s reputation was seriously damaged.

Repairing Penn State’s image will take time. College reputations, for better or worse, linger for years, often trailing the current state of the institution. A good reputation influences the college’s ability to attract outstanding faculty and administrators, secure gifts, gain federal funds, and attract positive media coverage; a poor one negates all those advantages.

Sullied institutional reputations can be rebuilt. In 2000 the board hired a president who has re-established the credibility and reputation of the college. Such institutional reputations are based on many factors, among them a calm climate, faculty scholarship and professional involvement, student success and postgraduate placements, and alumni and trustee prominence.

Nobel Prizes, MacArthur fellowships, professors called to top government positions, high rankings, large endowments, significant government grants and contracts, and other distinctions also help to build an institution’s reputation. That all takes effort and time, but a strong reputation can be crippled in one news cycle. That is why presidents have an important leadership role to play in assuring the continuation of a positive reputation—and in overcoming a damaged one.

It has been aptly said that presidents do not simply represent their institutions, they embody them. Indeed, higher-education historians often refer to historical periods at colleges and universities as presidential eras.

There are many initiatives a president can take that will help to build an institution’s reputation, including:

- Publishing articles in higher-education publications.
- Joining regional and national higher-education boards.
- Serving on panels and making presentations at conferences.
- Becoming active and visible in the community.
- Making judicious comments to the news media on higher-education issues.
- Building pride in the institution’s accomplishments among trustees, alumni, faculty, students, and community.
- Assembling an engaged board of trustees.
- Becoming media-savvy.
- Inviting well-known scholars to campus so that they can become ambassadors for the college.
- “I am supposed to work these habits into my crazy schedule, already disrupted by unexpected conflicts and crises!”

The assertion by Cohen and March that colleges make presidents, not the reverse, may be the response of many presidents. The presidency is an all-consuming position, with limited time for family, friends, and community activities. Some presidents have young children at home; others are caring for elderly parents or community members. That all takes e ort and time, and, of course, some people must work hard to help them achieve their goals.

Despite the challenges, there is a big payoff for the institution when the president becomes a respected and visible figure in higher education. Presidents who make the time and exercise the discipline to write and speak on higher-education issues help to build the reputation of their institutions. That goal should be written into a president’s job description.

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