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### **The Exploration of College Campus Traditions**

Traditions play a vital role on college and university campuses. The culture, heritage, and even legacy of an institution are deeply impacted by the traditions that take place there. From iconic events to a long history of academic excellence, the idea of tradition encompasses much of what takes place at a college or university. By studying the traditions of an institution one becomes aware of what its values and goals are. Higher education practitioners understand the importance of traditions and the roles they play with many constituents both internal and external. To the faculty, staff, and students who take part in them, traditions can represent the best parts of an institution from an excellence in scholarship to students building community together. To outside constituents, traditions can represent the uniqueness, importance, and value of each institution.

Traditions are not coincidental, but intentional pieces of history given from generation to generation (Bronner, 1998; Shils, 1981). These customs represent peoples from multiple generations as they bring communities together (Pelikan, 1984). “Literally, ‘tradition’ comes from the Latin for handing down or handing over and therefore contains the idea of transmission so crucial to the modern concept of folklore” (Bronner, 1992, p. 2). This idea of inheritance, handing down from generation to generation is a key component. According to Shils (1981), an event, activity, or object needs to be handed down for at least three generations to be considered a true tradition. It allows individuals to connect to their communities in a deeper way. “A sense of filiation or continuity is a sense of being ‘connected’ with an unbroken chain of generations

which have some significant quality in common” (Shils, 1981, p. 14). This connection provides a deeper significance of their existence, as an expression that brings value and meaning. Through participating in a tradition, individuals leave their mark but are also shaped by the tradition.

Tradition is inserting oneself into the conversation of history, contributing to the overall story. Tradition builds upon the individuals that contribute to it. Providing context for communities and an understanding of where they came from, tradition also gives a sense of power. Pelikan wrote, “What is so impressive about Augustine ... is that, as he drew from tradition and not only from Plato and Paul and other giants, so he also became part of the tradition...” (1984, p. 18). Through becoming part of that tradition, Augustine left his mark on the world and contributed to the larger story of humanity rather than his individual narrative. Tradition is fundamental to social life (Bronner, 1998, p. 41; Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 5). Connecting individuals not only to generations past, but to present generations as well, traditions have deep roots in social connection. In various societies, “... the role of tradition [is] the social glue that brings cohesiveness to a clan or tribe” (Pelikan, 1984, p. 6). Kuh & Whitt identify tradition in higher education contexts as having an influence, “Yet individual acts and events, when thought of as nested patterns of cultural behavior, have a pervasive, far-reaching influence on institutional life” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 5). This influence is the connection one receives through experiencing a tradition.

In his study of college environments and student learning, Kuh used tradition as a measurement of a strong institutional culture (1990). When an organization obtains strong traditions, the culture was found to be richer (Kuh, 1990). Communities with strong traditions, having spanned multiple years, refine their traditions to represent the core values of their culture. Through the refinement, individuals take ownership of the tradition and an individual’s sense of

belonging is important in building community moral and retaining members. Because of this importance, traditions “have a pervasive, far-reaching influence on institutional life” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 5). The historical context allows for individuals to have a starting point in developing the culture they have inherited (Bronner, 2011).

Very little research exists that focuses on the impact traditions have in higher education. This current study seeks to examine college and university traditions and define their value and importance for institutions of higher education. A team of researchers from Taylor University (USA) conducted 36 individual interviews with faculty and staff members at the university and five focus groups with students from first year through fourth. This was the first step in a larger project that will see the researchers conduct a similar process at several other colleges and universities.

Results showed the vital importance of traditions on a college or university campus. Faculty, staff, and students who participated in these traditions felt more connected to their institution and more a part of the community as a whole. Professors talked about how important it was for their students to be viewed as whole persons, how it actually helped their academics if they were able to participate in non-academic activities. Faculty and staff mentioned how it helped students to view them as real people, which in turn helped make students more comfortable in class and other situations. Faculty and staff also mentioned the significance of institutional traditions to the campus as a whole, mentioning that traditions bring the whole campus together despite the differences that sometimes divide, they provide a bridge of commonality. Additionally, faculty, staff, and students mentioned how traditions have significant impact when it comes to outside constituents. Returning alumni still feel connected to the campus culture, parents and prospective students recognize the prestige of an institution through

its most recognizable traditions, and other outside constituents are more likely to become involved on a campus that they perceive as having a vibrant culture.

In sum, the study confirmed that traditions are of vital importance to a college or university. Traditions have been shown to be a measurement and observable by-product of culture, displaying tradition's importance in the colligate setting. "The management of academic culture therefore involves both the management of meaning and the management of social integration" (Dill, 1982, p. 317). Traditions exhibit this well through providing a sense of belonging, social connection, and context to university values.

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