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## Reality Check

By John Lombardi May 1, 2007  
11:41 am

Everyone who lives the life of academic administration receives a steady flow of publications in their mail and email streams each day. Some of these items delight, some bore, and some outrage,

but all prompt amazement and awe at the energy and literary achievement they represent. We receive magazines, journals, and endless reports from various alphabet agencies. Some we deserve because we pay their sponsor agencies a membership fee and some come in unsolicited. My wiser colleagues, better managers of their time, don't read these things and instead have their staff pass them on to colleagues on the assumption that what the chancellor finds irrelevant and unworthy of review is of vital importance to a provost, a dean, or a department chair. My upbringing, however, does not permit such efficiency, and the voice of my father reaches out from beyond and reminds me that we never know when the irrelevant information we read will become useful. So I read most of the stuff. While my father was surely right about this, he didn't consider the problem of signal to noise ratio. Some of these items contain real informational gems, insights and data of great value to understanding the nature of the colleges and universities we inhabit. Much of the rest of it, is primarily noise, and the level of noise can, from time to time, rise to an eye-straining level of literary cacophony.

*Reality Check: The Blog* shares some of these items, without the irritating referral to my colleagues, by putting a note into the public blogosphere where anyone can ignore anything with enthusiasm, pleasure, and impunity. The items that attract attention here will fall into a number of categories; some I can predict now and some may emerge as time goes on.

One group of items include the endless self-promotional reports from our own institution and others that explain to a perhaps unaware public that our universities' teaching and research programs are not only terrific, constantly improving, but also unique in every respect (and thereby much better than anyone else's). Most of these do not merit much attention as institutional self-promotion is now a common occurrence, driven by the need to motivate alumni, recruit students, and impress colleagues at other institutions to perhaps influence reputation-based rankings. Some people read these publications with enthusiasm, others don't read them, don't receive them in the mail, or when they do, discard them immediately. A special place within this group belongs to the presidential/chancellor self-promotional pieces. Presented as institutional information or celebration, they characteristically feature a large and careful posed picture of the campus or system CEO on the cover, smiling with relentless enthusiasm about whatever it is the photographer mentioned at the time of the picture. These publications are great fun to do and for one's family to receive. A minor variation are the newsy updates from the university that also include, prominently in case we'd forgotten, other fine pictures of the institutional leader.

Another set of items captures the flow of reports, manifestos, and other publications from the associations to which we all belong. There are quite a few of these, almost all known by their initials, frequently starting with an A (ACE, AASCU, AACJC, AAU, ARL, AAUP). We can learn from the trustee group at the AGB or read about international affairs from NAFSA, which used to be the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors but now, in a more correct vein, is called the Association of International Educators but retains its NAFSA brand. In any case, all of these associations provide information about issues and activities relevant for those individuals whose institutions pay the membership fees. The associations serve in almost all cases as lobbying agents for the interests of the educators involved. Their executive directors usually work in Washington, DC, and have nice offices. The most prestigious associations have former university presidents as their directors and a few provide them fine homes in Georgetown.

Then there are the crisis reports. With considerable frequency, think-tanks, associations, government agencies, special blue ribbon committees, and other groups (ad hoc or semi-official in some respect) issue stirring calls to arms about this or that crisis affecting some aspect or even the whole of American higher education. Old warriors recognize these for the recurring phenomena that they are, but the best are filled with stirring rhetoric and alarming critique, and on occasion they serve as career builders for those engaged in their crusades. Sometimes the crisis reports provide accurate data, careful analysis, and useful recommendation. Often they also include pictures of the distinguished academic leaders whose names grace the commission, committee, or advisory board list. If they contain examples of best practices, which they often do, these exemplars correlate highly with the institutions whose names appear under the pictures.

We also receive articles, monographs, book length studies of various topics of interest to academic organization and management. As we troll through J-STOR, we come upon many interesting and substantial journal articles about critical university issues related to teaching or research or to the money and management of these marvelous places. A number of government agencies and university research centers also publish useful data and analyses that inspire admiration. These too fall within the purview of the *Reality Check Blog*.

As these items flow across my desk, this blog will share a perspective on their contents, quality, and utility. The *Reality Check blog* may inspire you to request a copy or immediately download the items mentioned, or, perhaps, to use them in a class on the literary theory of academic culture.