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## *The Role of Colleges in an Era of Mistrust*

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Over the past few years, a subtle but important shift has taken place in the general climate of opinion in our society. Mistrust has replaced trust, and people in positions of leadership can no longer assume that their words or actions will be given the benefit of the doubt.

From 2002 to 2004, for example, public trust in business leaders, already low at 36 percent, dropped five percentage points. That mistrust extends beyond corporations and their gatekeepers -- accountants, lawyers, and investment bankers -- to the government and the news media, and threatens to spread to the courts, nongovernmental organizations, and yes, institutions of higher learning.

The ability to communicate under these difficult conditions of mistrust has become a make-or-break skill. For many people associated with prestigious institutions like colleges and universities, however, that skill is distinctly outside their comfort zone. Most are used to assuming that they will be seen as acting in good faith, and until fairly recently this has been a safe assumption. But under today's conditions, the opposite often happens.

Three recent examples show how high-profile leaders and organizations have been blindsided by their failure to understand the pervasive shift from trust to mistrust:

- When reports of problems with the pain reliever Vioxx surfaced in the news media, its manufacturer, Merck & Company, withdrew the product from the market. Raymond V. Gilmartin, the company's chief executive officer, apparently assumed that action would resolve the problem. After all, a similar strategy had worked for Johnson & Johnson 20 years earlier, when product tampering of Tylenol capsules killed seven people. But instead of being hailed as a hero, Gilmartin was pilloried. Reports suggested that -- unlike Johnson & Johnson -- Merck had known about the problems with the drug and had swept them under the rug. Merck's stock was hammered, lawsuits proliferated, and the company was recently found liable for hundreds of millions of dollars. Many took the case as confirming their worst suspicions of big drug companies.

Gilmartin resigned his position almost a year before his scheduled retirement.

- San Diego's mayor, Dick Murphy, narrowly won re-election in a three-way race last fall, in spite of growing public concern about the city's financial crisis and pension problems. His strategy during and after the election was to soothe public fears by assuring San Diegans that the experts in City Hall would deal with the situation fairly and effectively. However, instead of creating the trust that he had intended, his strategy did just the opposite. His position was seen as ostrichlike denial and a total failure of leadership. Already damaged by the contested election and a federal investigation into the city's financial-disclosure practices, Murphy was driven to resign this past spring.

- Closer to home, we have the experience of Larry Summers, president of Harvard University, whose speculations on the causes of women's underrepresentation in the sciences erupted into months of controversy. In that incident, Summers suffered from two common problems. First, he presupposed trust -- that his words would be taken as he intended them to be. Second, he showed a lack of what might be called "CEO Consciousness": the awareness that those at the very top of an organization must exercise greater tact and care in the way they express themselves.

Those are cautionary tales. In each case, a leader assumed he would be given the benefit of the doubt and in each case was proved wrong, with serious consequences for himself and the organization. Such incidents are becoming more common, and those who teach and work in higher education cannot expect to be immune to similar public responses.

The current wave of mistrust is only the latest of three that have swept the nation in the last 75 years. The first wave occurred in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Its major cause was massive, unyielding unemployment that affected an overwhelming one-third of the work force and indirectly undermined the living standards of all but the wealthiest Americans.

In those chaotic years, the mistrust was so intense and widespread that it threatened to topple capitalism itself.

The reputation of business plummeted, and the legitimacy of the market system came into serious question. Anticapitalist ideologies -- Marxist, Trotskyite, Socialist -- gained a foothold, and in some quarters far more than that. Such ideologies might even have prevailed were it not for the flurry of business and social legislation introduced during the Roosevelt administration. Even with those efforts, the Depression -- and that era of mistrust -- did not end until the United States entered World War II in 1941. From beginning to end, that wave persisted for more than a decade.

The second wave lasted roughly the same length, from the late 1960s to 1980, but the source of the mistrust in those years differed from that of the Great Depression. Political events -- the war in Vietnam, along with the Watergate scandal and its cover-up that drove Richard Nixon from office -- converged with serious economic stagflation. (In 1974, for instance, the combined levels of unemployment and inflation approached 20 percent.) The nation's productivity and competitiveness were so badly stalled that Americans feared that the Japanese economy would overtake our own.

Unlike the 1930s, when public concern focused sharply on the economy, virtually all institutions got caught up in the 1970s wave of mistrust. Tracking polls revealed a precipitous decline of confidence in government. In 1964 an impressive three-quarters of all Americans (76 percent) believed that you can trust the federal government to do the right thing all or most of the time. By 1980 that hefty majority had shrunk to a mere one-fourth minority (25 percent).

The lack of trust in business was nearly as extreme, plunging from 70 percent in 1968 to 29 percent in 1980. Other institutions fared just as badly: Between 1966 and 1982, confidence in the medical profession fell from 71 percent to 32 percent, in colleges from 61 percent to 30 percent, and in the news media from a miserably low starting point of 29 percent to less than half of that number, or 14 percent. So pervasive was the climate of mistrust that it even affected Americans' attitudes toward one another: While in 1968 a majority, or 56 percent, of Americans believed that "most other people can be trusted," by 1980 only 39 percent agreed.

The third and current wave of mistrust began to build momentum in 2002. If it follows the same pattern as the other two waves, it is still in its early stages. It was triggered by a seemingly endless round of scandals affecting

not only business (Enron, WorldCom, HealthSouth, Adelphia Communications), but also once-trusted organizations (the Red Cross, the Catholic Church, state and municipal pension boards). Yet while the scandals played a role in bringing mistrust to the surface, its root causes run deeper.

In recent decades, a serious imbalance has arisen in our society between norms and laws. Traditionally, laws have established the border between criminal and noncriminal behavior. By defining certain acts as unacceptable, the law has set the minimum standard of conduct that a society demands of its members and has meted out punishments for those who transgress it. But no society can operate by laws alone; layered on top of the law is a thick set of social norms that also distinguishes between right and wrong. In most societies, the layer of law is relatively thin, while the layer of social norms that sets the standards for how people and institutions should act is much thicker. That largely uncodified body of social norms is essential to the healthy functioning of society.

Over the past 30 years, however, America's traditional norms have significantly eroded. The nation's "cultural revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s had many positive results. We made enormous gains in diversity, tolerance, and inclusiveness that few Americans would be willing to reverse. Most people now enjoy a far greater latitude to express themselves and choose their own lifestyle. However, that revolution also had unintended consequences, one of the most profound being a decline in our social morality. The result is that actions and behaviors are often put to only the minimal test of whether they are legal or illegal. Today it is not uncommon to hear the claim: "I didn't break the law, so I didn't do anything wrong." Such a rationale for unethical behavior would have been unthinkable in earlier periods of American life, when society assumed that people's responsibilities encompassed far more than merely satisfying the minimal standard of legality.

Not only has the erosion of our social norms led to the scandals that have plagued American corporate life, it has also surfaced in the incivility on display so frequently in public places -- aggressive driving, obscenity, violent public confrontations, and the like. It has been a central factor in the proliferation of crudeness and excessive violence in popular culture and entertainment, and in the increasingly polarized and ideological tone of public discourse.

**Y**et today a countervailing force is emerging: There is a movement to revitalize and bolster traditional norms among people who are disenchanted with the current situation. Tracking studies clearly show a trend away from the widespread embrace of the moral relativism that was an immediate consequence of the cultural revolution. Americans are more likely today than 15 years ago to insist that there are absolute standards of right and wrong. When faced with the statement, "It's not for individuals to decide what's right or wrong; we all must live by the same code," 42 percent of Americans in 1988 strongly agreed. By 2003 a 52-percent majority strongly agreed.

The trend back toward absolute values has positive elements. The core values embraced by most Americans -- patriotism, individualism, hard work, community, diversity, cooperation, civility -- represent a vital mixture of traditionalist and progressive perspectives. But the same impulse toward absolutes is also now fueling antirationalism and greater skepticism toward liberal and intellectual institutions. This antirationalist tendency is not necessarily anti-intellectual; rather, it challenges the empirical, scientific, and technological thinking that has largely dominated the Western tradition over the last 300 years. The theory of intelligent design, which sidesteps the rules of evidence that guide the scientific method, is a prominent recent example of that kind of antirationalist theory.

Even though colleges are not usually direct targets of the increased mistrust, they are increasingly affected by it. In a time when antirationalist bias is on the upswing, colleges' standing as havens of Enlightenment thought can place them in the line of fire. They are made doubly vulnerable by their privileged position: Not only are they often wealthy and influential, they enjoy the ability to pursue the work of intellectual exploration largely free of demands that such work have immediate practical application. If, however, the public comes to perceive that the privilege is being abused (whether through financial misdealings or intellectual or political high-handedness), then pre-existing tensions can blossom into outright hostility. In addition, colleges can be tarred by their strong links with other institutions and individuals viewed with mistrust, like business schools, law schools, and policy-making elites -- the watchdogs who should have protected the public interest but did not.

But crises can also be opportunities. Colleges have a double incentive to improve their ability to operate and communicate under conditions of mistrust. First, it is clearly in their interest to avoid the sort of missteps that have caused other people and organizations so much trouble. But even

beyond their immediate interests, colleges have a leadership opportunity to help improve our overall cultural climate and bring our society's norms and laws into better balance. They are widely seen as trustworthy, credible, and public-spirited organizations, which gives them latitude for action and leadership that other entities -- corporations, regulatory agencies, and nongovernmental organizations -- do not enjoy, and with it an opportunity to help bring this period of mistrust to a quicker end.

To do this, however, colleges need to adapt to the current climate. We offer 10 main principles for communicating under conditions of mistrust.

**Avoid ethically neutral or value-free stands, which in a climate of mistrust are seen as deceitful.** One of the peculiarities of this era of mistrust is that intense polarization has made claims of neutrality highly suspect. Those who profess to be value free are often assumed to be hiding an ideological agenda. For example, even if the news media are not in fact any more biased than in the past, they are routinely accused of slanting stories to one side or another -- and their credibility suffers in consequence.

While neutrality is automatically suspect, false neutrality is even more so. There are many arenas where universities are not and should not be neutral -- for example, the scientific standing of evolutionary theory. Soft-pedaling a stance in the name of avoiding offense or upholding a spurious notion of "objectivity" will inevitably backfire, making people even more resentful than they might have been.

**Recognize that more is expected from privileged institutions.** Colleges have an advantage on this front: Most understand the responsibilities of privilege and do a great deal to meet them. But in the present climate, colleges should be explicit about that commitment. They cannot assume that people know exactly what or how much they are doing to fulfill their ethical obligation to go beyond the bare-minimum standard of behavior.

To take only one example: Most colleges offer educational opportunities and scholarships to underprivileged members of the community. San Diego State University has taken that obligation several steps further, establishing a close working relationship between its teacher-education program and San Diego's most-challenged public schools. The program, which began at the high-school level and now includes middle and elementary schools, is aimed at improving educational opportunities for all students in the community, not just the fortunate few who will attend college.

**Recognize that silence, denial, and closed doors are almost always interpreted as evidence of bad faith.** Administrators and faculty members can be a prickly lot, and educational institutions have long been careful about how they approach difficult issues. Confidential, closed-door discussions are extremely valuable in that they give all parties the chance to speak honestly, and they have become accepted as standard procedure. In an ordinary climate, few eyebrows would be raised -- but a mistrustful public will attribute the worst possible motives to such maneuvers.

For example, Karen S. Haynes, president of California State University at San Marcos, found herself embroiled in controversy in the months before the 2004 presidential election when the university, acting on the advice of legal counsel, canceled a speaking appearance by the filmmaker Michael Moore. Widely criticized by those within the campus and outside of it, Haynes later acknowledged that it had been a mistake to act without consulting faculty members and students. The ultimate decision might well have been the same, she said, "but the process wasn't done right."

When it is possible to make deliberations open and transparent, colleges must do so. When open-door meetings are not prudent or practical, colleges must be careful to ensure that all the affected parties have a place at the table. Just as important, they must emerge with a clear account not only of what was decided but of how that decision was reached.

**Do not assume you will be given the benefit of the doubt. Colleges have been fortunate in recent years.** For the most part, they have avoided the kinds of scandals and egregious mismanagement that have damaged a wide range of institutions. That does not mean, however, that colleges are immune from the general mistrust, or that complacency is justified. Colleges must tread carefully; a misstep will not be easily or quickly forgiven, as the Larry Summers situation demonstrated.

**Work out your positions on emotion-laden issues in advance -- and communicate them effectively within the institution.** Colleges contend with controversial issues all the time -- including race, gender, class, religion, and the boundaries of political expression. Educational institutions must pay careful attention to how their positions on highly polarized issues influence their students, faculty members, neighbors, and the larger society. And they must take the initiative, rather than just hastily respond to scandals or controversy.

Communicating such positions internally is a vital part of the process, and one that is often neglected or ineffectual. A committee that is responsible for hashing out a policy might engage in a heated discussion, work through a difficult issue, and arrive at a resolution. But if that resolution is not effectively understood and supported by faculty members and administrators, it is effectively useless. Simply making sure that everyone gets a memo is not enough -- all parties must participate in shaping the vision and ensuring that everyone who speaks for the college understands and participates.

**Be mindful that anything but plain talk is suspect. As a rule, colleges do not go in for plain talk.** Subtlety, qualifications, and nuance are the order of the day, and many people in academe take pride in that complexity. Yet it is important to keep in mind that nuance does not penetrate mistrust -- in fact, it can worsen it by making people feel they are being "spun." When communicating with the larger society, colleges must expect that the audience may be hostile, liable to interpret ambiguity in the most unfavorable way.

In the midst of the Michael Moore controversy, Karen Haynes wrote an op-ed article explaining the university's decision to cancel the appearance. Written with an admirable clarity, her explanation did not try to spin or sell the university's decision. Instead, it laid out the university's rationale, and it candidly acknowledged the merits of people's objections. Her honest, plain talk did a great deal to defuse the hostility and mistrust surrounding the case.

**Recognize that being "good people" and having "good motives" are not acceptable rationalizations.** Educators are used to seeing themselves as the good guys. Even when they are throwing their weight around like corporate raiders of the first order -- playing hardball with employees, moving aggressively to bolster the institution's portfolio or real-estate holdings -- they view themselves as selfless and humanitarian. Their actions, after all, are aimed not at self-enrichment, but at the long-term health of the institution. Unfortunately, being honorable people acting for the good of a noble institution does not suffice in the public's eyes. To the public, hardball is hardball. Colleges often don't realize the negative impact such an approach has on their standing.

A prime example: Cornell, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and Northwestern Universities have been sued by the Justice Department, and have had to make cash settlements, for using federal funds for purposes other than the ones that



the money was intended to support. The administrators in question no doubt saw their actions as proper and their motives pure, but the wider public is not likely to see matters in that light.

**Respond to the public's genuine hunger for honesty and integrity.** Polls show the public places an ever-higher premium on the traditional benchmarks of integrity: honesty, respect for employees and other constituencies, and high-quality goods and services. In addition, people want organizations to operate transparently, to show a human face to the outside world, to live up to their own professed standards of behavior, and to demonstrate a commitment to the larger society. Mistrust is widespread, but beneath it lies a hunger for engagement and deeper connections -- and institutions that break through the layer of mistrust can satisfy that hunger.

**Build trust.** The best way to build trust is to make sure that your performance exceeds expectations whenever possible -- which is easy to say but often neglected in practice. For example, colleges usually describe their mission as evenly divided among research, teaching, and service to society. However, institutional realities often mean that those three elements are not treated equally.

At most research universities, research rules the roost, teaching is handled largely as an internal matter, and community relations is shunted off into a separate, satellite operation relatively isolated from professors and administrators. The result is that people outside the institutions see the intersection between town and gown -- the very point where it is most important for a university to live up to its promises -- pushed down to the bottom of priorities. There is no more effective way to destroy the community's trust than to pay lip service to noble ideas while failing to follow through on the things that matter most to the public. Colleges must make an honest effort to determine what they are really prepared to do -- and, when in doubt, err on the side of underpromising rather than overpromising.

**Make a conscious effort to move toward a "stewardship" ethic.** Stewardship involves making a commitment to leaving the institution better off than you found it. It also extends the perimeter of whom the institution cares for, and how it cares for them, to include a much wider community.

That ethic of stewardship is a far cry from the prevailing ethical norm of staying within the law, as well as the more conscientious standard of "passing the smell test." But more is needed to combat the current wave of mistrust, and

of all our cultural institutions, colleges are perhaps best positioned to embody and promote a stewardship ethic.

Most colleges, as longstanding institutions, take their legacy seriously. And as educators of future leaders, well-springs of intellect and technological advancements, and custodians of our cultural heritage, most colleges also try to serve society as broadly as they can. What is needed, however, is a commitment to turning the ideals of stewardship into meaningful actions.

Some institutions have already begun to take steps in that direction. For instance, a number of research universities have established multidisciplinary programs to address issues of environmental stewardship. Those universities -- among them, Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Stanford, and Yale Universities, and the University of California and the University of Michigan systems -- are bringing together scientists, political leaders, businessmen and women, and others to deal with issues like climate change, deforestation, and sustainable development. Universities are the only large-scale institutions with the credibility and resources to make that happen; that they are moving in such a direction is a good example of stewardship in action.

The nation has entered a period of resurgent mistrust -- and it is all too likely that the situation will get worse before it gets better. The scandals have attracted public notice, but their implications have not yet fully sunk in. In particular, the role that the corporate gatekeepers have played in enabling such scandals has not yet reached the level of public consciousness that we believe it eventually will. When these ideas do sink in, our society may well see public mistrust -- now primarily focused on business, the news media, and government -- directed at a wider group of targets, including colleges.

If the current wave of mistrust parallels the previous two -- as it seems likely to do -- our country is in for a decade or more of uncertainty. Colleges would do well to prepare themselves to weather this time. We hope, however, that they will do more than that.

Colleges have a unique position of privilege. More than any other institution in our society, they are seen as trusted conveners, not only unbiased in attitude but also knowledgeable. That position, which they still hold in spite of the current climate, gives them an unusual opportunity for leadership. If they embrace that leadership role, our institutions of higher learning can help our society regain its ethical bearings and rebuild the public trust.

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