

# Before All \* @ # % ! Breaks Loose...

*In helping your institution grapple with public-relations challenges, be prepared to track emerging issues through four distinct stages.*

**I**N SEPTEMBER 2005, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced the formation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education. But many knowledgeable observers reacted with surprise. Why was the secretary acting now? What is the purpose of the commission? Is the Bush administration pushing to implement a college version of the No Child Left Behind law?

Many of these questions will be answered as the commission completes its work this fall. Yet we know from the group's membership and discussions to date that accountability is going to be a major theme of its recommendations. Trustees and chief executives need to ask why we were taken aback by creation of a major commission and what boards can do in response to this and other issues that arise nationally and on our campuses.

Part of the answer may lie in three words: "Just Do It."

Nike's slogan for its athletic apparel is pervasive, yet the company's story has not always been a positive one. The 1990s saw Nike struggle with its response to activists' protests against

the alleged "sweatshop" labor standards of its foreign suppliers.

How strategists at the Oregon-based company managed to turn things around was the subject of a December 2004 article in the *Harvard Business Review* by Simon Zadek, "The Path to Corporate Responsibility." The powerful tension between the company's performance and society's moral expectations makes this story highly relevant to higher education, particularly after the issue of sweatshop labor has been fought out on numerous campuses whose athletics departments and booster shops signed merchandise contracts with controversial suppliers.

Groups of labor and student activists targeted Nike, Zadek contends, not because the company's contractor labor practices were worse than those of its competitors but rather because of its high-profile brand name. The pressure on Nike grew to such a degree that the company could not afford to wait until improvements occurred throughout the industry.

As a result, Nike's decision to work with the federal government, nongovernmental organi-

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zations, and the higher education community to reform its own operations created the movement that transformed the apparel industry with Nike as the leader. That we hear much less about this issue today is a tribute to Nike's willingness to confront the issue and to recognize four distinct stages of "issue maturity."

This analytical tool can help boards, chief executives, and campus administrators prevent small issues from growing beyond our ability to manage them. Issues that merit analysis in terms of the process of maturity could include anything from excesses in presidential compensation, to controversial campus speakers, to sexually explicit student publications, to faculty members who express sympathy with causes linked to terrorism. Perennials in our enterprise include tuition hikes and demands for accountability.

The Nike experience illustrates the pitfalls of bare-minimum responsiveness and simple compliance with demands and critiques of our stakeholders. Rather, we must take an active stance on potentially important issues directly affecting us.

**The Four Stages.** Following is a scale we have modified from Zadek's study of Nike that college or university officials may use to measure the issue-maturity process and the public response along the way. Briefly, as an issue evolves from a *fringe* issue to *emerging*, then approaches *hot* and *white hot*, institutions begin to lose control until eventually their influence disappears. Trustees and chief executives can examine their institution's local or national issues by looking for the characteristics of each stage.

*1. Fringe:* At this stage, people may be discussing an issue at conferences or in professional publications such as *Trusteeship* or *Change*. A few articles may appear in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or other trade publications, but the issue

does not appear to be on the mainstream radar screen. For local issues, a few concerned members of the community may be conversing on the issue.

*2. Emerging:* There is now far greater media interest in the issue. Polling confirms that it is of concern to society more broadly, and politicians begin to take it more seriously. No solution is apparent, but it is clear that the issue is not simply going to go away. Over the past 15 years, this is generally where the accountability issue has hovered. With no clear easy solution to the problem, the issue persists at a slow, steady simmer.

*3. Getting Hot:* At this point, there is much public discussion and considerable criticism that nothing is happening. Community groups have united and are urging movement by the institution. Politicians, the news media, and local leaders call for action. They are waiting for the institution to do something they can support. The case of rising tuition is a current example of this type of issue. Headlines lament the ever-increasing price of higher education, with politicians at the state and federal levels threatening to become involved if colleges fail to rein in the increases.

*4. White Hot/Too Late:* When an issue reaches this stage, there is widespread perception that the institution has neither the will nor the ability to deal with it adequately. The results may be unfavorable legislation, cuts in funding, or regulations that influence the institution's ability to govern itself. There are numerous examples of white hot issues in society. Congressional hearings and public pressure forced Major League Baseball and the players union to deal with the steroid issue that had plagued the sport for decades. On campuses, controversies surrounding commercialization of Division I athletics often approach this point.





**The Example of Accountability.** Let's explore the most frequent responses to each issue-maturity stage. The accountability debate currently surrounding higher education is a useful example.

*1. Fringe:* Colleges and universities try to avoid fringe issues, hoping that because they show up only at the margins, they will go away. Sometimes an issue does fade, but sleeping dogs occasionally awake and bite. For much of the last 25 years, the notion of public accountability was only a casual concern of higher education leaders. Most institutions were enjoying sufficient levels of applicants and financial support, muting calls for increased accountability. Many believed the issue would vanish as institutions began to assess their own performance.

*2. Emerging:* Higher education begins to ramp up its public-relations machine to ensure that our side of the story is told. National associations begin to discuss the issue, but no one gets overly excited, as the issue may still go away. The emerging stage aptly describes the status of the accountability debate during the 1990s.

As levels of state funding declined, tuitions increased, and the public became more concerned about what their tuition dollars actually were buying, the debate on accountability ripened. Several higher education associations and think tanks created blue-ribbon panels that offered recommendations on how to improve teaching and measure student learning. Rumors swirled through the higher education community about what reforms the Bush administration might push for in the wake of the No Child Left Behind law. Still, most of us believed that the issue would go away with economic recovery and small institutional changes.

*3. Getting Hot:* We are now at high alert. We need more effective public relations and the support of our national associations to tell our story. We think the public

just does not understand our position and suspect that if we work hard enough, the wisdom and correctness of our position will prevail. And again, all will be well.

This is the current state of the accountability debate in higher education. The Spellings Commission has spurred the industry to action. National associations and institutional leaders are speaking to members of the commission and the press about the difficulty in assessing colleges and universities. Additionally, the public-relations machine is actively reporting the success of individual institutions across the country. Yet even with our best efforts, the situation grows hotter with each *New York Times* headline.

*4. White Hot/Too Late:* When an issue gets white hot, we take our lumps, and the blame game begins. Fingers point at the president for being a weak communicator. Presidents blame the national associations for failing to effectively explain our position. Throughout higher education, there's a sense that the public is shortsighted and unwilling to see "the truth."

This likely will become the next stage of the accountability issue if we do not actively take charge. If Congress and the public do not believe that college and university officials are responding appropriately to the Spellings Commission, it would be easy to envision legislation that would require accountability measures on our campuses. At that point, we no longer would be able to control the accountability issue, and we would be forced to accept some unpalatable changes.

**Bulls by the Horns.** What should trustees and chief executives be doing to avoid the escalation of issues that end up out of control in the public arena? Here is where the Nike story provides distinct lessons for higher education leaders.

Although an organization's natural response to attacks or criticism is to assume

a defensive posture, this usually is counterproductive. And simply complying with demands puts an organization in a passive position and gives it no control of the issue. A better approach, visible in the Nike experience, is to incorporate issues into an overall organizational strategy that allows leaders to transform their operations while staying true to their mission. In the context of the college accountability issue, such an active approach differs at each of the four stages:

*1. Fringe:* Presidents and boards should begin early on to recognize the issue as having potential to escalate. Encourage staff to examine options and consequences of various approaches to dealing with the issue; avoid assuming that the challenges are specious. The public-relations team should begin developing positions that will be available if the issue escalates.

Jay Conger, a professor of leadership studies at Claremont McKenna College, suggests it is a big mistake to assume that the secret of persuasion lies only in creating great arguments. It is not too early to begin examining the issue to determine whether concerns expressed on the fringe have some validity. If so, now is the time to determine appropriate organizational responses, besides simply beginning to craft the appropriate spin.

*2. Emerging:* The institution's leadership team should begin to examine ways to ameliorate the problems raised by the issue. What parts of the issue need to be addressed? Can we view the issues in a new light? Is our position defensible or an example of "groupthink"? Before an organization ramps up the public-relations machine, it first must seriously examine critics' points of view, keep an open mind, and avoid defensive posturing.

If the institution has prepared well, weighed all options, and still believes the best approach is to stay the course, then tell the story and make it a good one. College and university leaders should use vivid language, look for common ground, use reliable facts to buttress their position, and connect with the issue in a way that makes it come alive to those they are trying to

influence. On the other hand, if the initial review suggests that changes need to be made, now is the time to do so and to explain why.

*3. Getting Hotter:* The battle is being lost, and officials now need to consider more seriously options all sides can live with. To garner support, officials must demonstrate the flexibility to respond to the public's concerns and the will to find common ground. Compromise does not mean surrender.

*4. White Hot/Too Late:* The issue has escalated out of control. The public believes we are intractable, outside forces take control and force action, and our unwillingness to compromise has made us weaker for future challenges. In such instances, restoring credibility will be difficult. Resignations and firings may be necessary as the organization attempts to move beyond the crisis.

**Avoid Denial.** Being mindful of the issue-maturity process may help trustees and chief executives remain aware of the public's perceptions about potentially important issues. It would be folly to deny that seemingly low-interest issues will not escalate. Colleges and universities need to open effective lines of communication with the public and establish effective ways to learn about emerging issues.

Many fringe issues may simply go away, but we do a disservice to our colleges and universities by simply standing idly by hoping for this to occur. By tracking public sentiment and taking their concerns seriously, higher education officials will be better able to predict and act on the evolving issues before they reach the White Hot/Too Late stage. ♦




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