

Colleges & Universities: The Challenge of Integrating Emotional Intelligence with Intellectual Development

By: Melinda Swan, CEO, The Collective Genius

“The spectacle also appalled many non-college, working-class people who viewed students as pampered, selfish, anti-American, unpatriotic.”

This quote from former student activist, former US Secretary of Labor and now Professor Robert Reich describing the public’s reactions to anti-Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s.

His words could have been penned to describe the perceptions of many people in response to campus uprisings around the country, especially student protests over issues in Palestine and Israel.

The polyglot of venom and hyperbole around our country’s institutions of higher education has been gummed to mush. We’re all dizzied by the topical flurry: academic freedom; freedom of speech; anti-Semitism; disregard for human rights; woke professors; state-set restrictions or bans on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs; transgender sports rules. The list seems endless.

We watched the Congressional spectacle that completely dismantled the careers of two women college presidents and has now finally ended the tenure of a third. (Were there no male college presidents who experienced campus unrest?) And while empathetic to the Presidents’ plight, we also chafed at the woodenness of some of their answers.

As a 40-year veteran in the communications field who has trained many on public presentations and media interviewing, I think deeply about how different university administrators respond to controversies and crises. I long for a perfect playbook to minimize conflict and maximize mutual respect and understanding. Yet, it’s clear that my desire for the perfect appears as futile as Icarus’ quest to fly close to the sun. Those who claim to know all the answers have fallen prey to an overconfident ego.

I do believe, however, that some of the issues could have been less divisive and even deescalated more quickly had certain practices, protocols, communication styles and a greater understanding of the ultimate audience been created or reexamined before the latest issues surfaced. The time to set rules and consequences for disrupting classrooms is not when building doorways are blockaded by protesting students. The opportunity to create constructive dialogue between Boards of Trustees, alumni, faculty, and students should be before the moment when disagreements enflame mutual disdain and dissatisfaction.

Many campuses did and do have protocols in place. But were these standards recently reexamined in light of a fast-changing world? How often and in what manner were these principles shared with the campus community? Was there dialogue around fairness and mutual agreement on appropriate enforcement?

Did campus leaders host forums or use practices like Art of Hosting or the brainstorming techniques of IDEO to help people at least reach a common understanding—if not a common solution? Have we trained leaders among students, faculty, administrators, and the Board on how to listen to one another without judgment and ask deeper questions? Have we worked to

build bridges between state legislators and campus colleagues before facing greater legislative oversight or restrictions?

Moreover, and with all great respect for my peers, have we reconsidered our language and communications style? When I started, those in public relations taught techniques for focusing conversations on what we wanted to say. Some of those tactics were criticized, especially when they resulted in zombie-like repetitive interviews. Today, anything less than full, authentic responsiveness can be immediately misconstrued. As a result, the message will flounder and drown in a sea of mistrust and negativity.

Finally, never forget that a vocal minority does not speak for the silent majority. I'm often stymied to explain how our obsession with the fringe's vitriol outweighs our faith in reasonable people's thoughtfulness. That does not mean, as I've often heard from leadership, that you do not respond to criticism. If you don't fill the information vacuum, someone or sheer human speculation will do it for you. But never confuse the few and loud with your ultimate audience. They may share little to nothing in common.

None of these ideas will be foolproof firewalls. But they may prove foundational in cultivating a campus and a wider community uplifted by greater trust and mutual respect.

ABOUT MELINDA SWAN:



For more than 40 years, Melinda Swan has helped aspiring thought-leaders and advocacy organizations gain awareness, credibility, and intended outcomes.

In her early career, she brought recognition to a South Florida HMO with a first-ever health wellness campaign and wellness expo, and during her tenure as an aide in the Ohio Senate, her weekly columns gained significant readership and engagement in her Senator's home district. As press secretary to Ohio's attorney general, she garnered significant media coverage and editorial support for the office's work in environmental protection, consumer and charitable fraud prevention and enforcement, and creative use of racketeering laws to target organized crime.

During the early 1990s, she crafted a statewide campaign for Children's Defense Fund-Ohio that was called one of the best public affairs efforts of the time. She also successfully managed strategic and crises communications as a press secretary to a gubernatorial candidate and the first woman to run a US Senate primary campaign in Ohio. Her first company, started in 1995, advanced the advocacy and business goals of an array of clients including Jobs for Ohio's Graduates, Children's Hunger Alliance, and the construction industry advisors at a regional accounting firm.

As chief of staff for Columbus City Council from 2000-2007, she brought greater transparency and accountability to the Council process, embedding an electronic legislative tracking system, implementing a consent agenda and related reforms. She helped pass and then successfully defend a referendum on the city's clean indoor air law, implemented a cardiac arrest initiative

that saved more than 30 lives in its first year, helped negotiate an agreement on Big Darby land use, and earned federal and state investments in developing a technology corridor anchored by The Ohio State University.

Her work as Chief Operating Officer of the YWCA increased the organization's community stature by reorganizing the family shelter and moving from a "D" to "A" grade and maximizing and collecting on contracts and income for childcare and after-school programs. As Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications at The Ohio State University, she earned national attention for inner-disciplinary research collaborations and led the University's first-ever comprehensive research effort.

Since launching her second firm in 2011, The Collective Genius, Melinda has been a strategic partner to highly successful advocates like The Columbus Urban League and Maryhaven, combining research, marketing, advertising, experiential marketing, public and media relations strategies to achieve key goals and increase revenues by as much as eightfold. Her work for ADAMH of Franklin County helped them garner more than 75% of the vote for a levy. She teamed up with National Church Residences to secure zoning and Council approval for an infill senior housing project in Worthington, engaged investors and customers for two start-ups in the clean energy space, assisted a higher education leader in overcoming a negative crisis and founding a nonprofit to advance affordability in higher education, and is guiding a university's women in higher education leadership program to greater prominence and impact. She also created a second company in 2015, Anchored to Hope, LLC, which recently won a state grant to conduct a pilot initiative to reduce recidivism and promote recovery at five sites across Ohio.

Melinda has designed and facilitated numerous planning sessions, team-building exercises and focus groups drawing upon best practices in qualitative research, Art of Hosting, Appreciative Inquiry, and brainstorming practices perfected at Stanford.

Her work has won recognition from the Columbus Marketing Association and The Ohio State University Board of Trustees.