Focus on Excellence

Dear Tennessee’s Business readers:

This issue of Tennessee’s Business is particularly appropriate. We should take every opportunity to focus on, celebrate, and establish excellence as that for which we constantly strive. It should be the goal for every program, professor, and student on campus—not just those units that happen to carry a specific designation. To fail to celebrate excellence is to celebrate mediocrity.

So what is excellence? The dictionary defines it as superiority, something remarkably good. Does that mean it is elitist? Perhaps, since elite means the best of anything considered collectively. That which is excellent stands apart. It has characteristics and accomplishments that others of its same broad classification do not possess. Such recognition is sometimes considered politically incorrect.

However, excellence is a relative measure. In a given athletic conference, one team may stand out above all the others. There may be no doubt that one team is the very best in the conference. Compared only to the others in the conference, that team is excellent, but compared to teams of other conferences, it may be mediocre.

Some might say the team should decide never to play outside the conference so its position of relative excellence is never challenged. In this small, protected environment, the team can maintain its relative position, but is the team likely to improve if it plays only at this level of competition?

It is imperative that we benchmark excellence not just against those who play in our conference, however that may be defined. Rather, we must seek out the best in the world and establish our claim to excellence there, or should we objectively benchmark against the best in the world, recognize any deficiencies we have, establish a clear plan for improvement, and set about putting sufficient effort and resources to the accomplishment of the plan?

Tennessee was wise to provide resources establishing Centers of Excellence and Chairs of Excellence. Some of these centers and chairs have become the benchmark in their respective areas. They play in the global conference. We must do much more of this.

It is now time to insist that Tennessee elementary, middle, and high schools as well as universities must also be centers for excellence. Anything less means future generations of Tennesseans may well find themselves standing in the starting blocks when the race is over.

The examples of the Centers and Chairs of Excellence show that we can take quantum leaps forward. Let’s decide again to do so.

Sincerely,

E. James Burton, Dean
Jennings A. Jones College of Business
Middle Tennessee State University