

# 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 that as our comparative, our standard for attainment.

Some might say that is too big a stretch—one must be satisfied with incremental gains. I don't see it that way. If you are running last in a race and pass half of the field, you will not win. Sometimes quantum leaps are necessary.

If you are one step behind a quarter of the way through the race and every runner maintains speed, you will be four steps behind at the end. In any endeavor, if you are playing catch-up, you must run faster than those in front just to get even. Often, whoever is in front doesn't just maintain the pace but picks it up. It takes a burst of energy, an infusion of resources, to make up the distance and take the lead.

So how does this apply to education? Some in

Tennessee are satisfied to make comparisons only within the state or, at most, across the Southeast. They want to play in a small, confined conference where the chance of looking good is improved because what little competition exists certainly isn't remarkable. One can then say, "Our school did well on this test compared to that school across town or in the next county," or, "Our university programs compete effectively against others in Tennessee or surrounding states. Let's be sure to stay within the conference where we can look good."

However, the competition for those who come through our educational system is not just people from the next school or county or adjacent states. Our graduates must compete against the best in the world, and it is our responsibility to prepare them for this competition.

By many published measures, Tennessee's educational system does not fare well against neighboring states, the nation, or the world, even if we appear to be doing well in our own little conference.

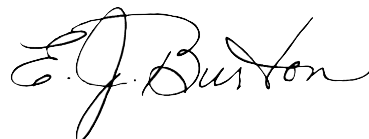
So where is the standard of excellence? Should we find a measure on which we do well against those in our conference and firmly plant our claim to excellence there, or should we objectively benchmark against the best in the world, recognize any deficiencies we have, establish a clear plan for improvement, 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,



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