Editorial: One’s reputation, once tarnished, is hard to regain

By Don Huebscher
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While the financial improprieties reportedly committed by a former UW-Stout administrator don’t rise to the level of the cable TV program “American Greed,” they beg the question why someone making $145,000 a year would jeopardize his career to squeeze more out of the university and state taxpayers.

Ed Nieskes resigned his position as a vice chancellor and, of all things, director of business and financial services, after an audit found he billed the university for a number of personal purchases, including a Star Wars toy valued at $118.

In all, the audit found $1,023 in personal travel expenses or submission of false claims by Nieskes plus another $319 in personal expenses not reimbursed, including the Star Wars toy, gas for his personal car and food purchases.

The audit concluded Nieskes circumvented UW System travel regulations in an attempt to conceal his personal expenses and false claims.

Nieskes was placed on paid leave Feb. 18 and told by Chancellor Charles Sorensen to resign by March 2 or be fired. In his resignation letter, Nieskes said he did not believe “the non-renewal was warranted or justified.”

Unless he has proof that the audit’s conclusions are in error, how could he possibly believe he should continue to work at the university?

Nieskes’ violation of trust is highly troubling on several fronts. To his fellow UW-Stout employees, most of whom make far less than he did and recently took a hefty cut in take-home pay, his efforts to augment his salary in such a manner must be nothing short of galling. To the university’s students, he failed miserably as an example of high ethical standards. And to Wisconsin taxpayers who help pay the bills, his actions fan the flames of critics who claim there’s an entitlement mentality within the UW System.

That’s the problem when someone plays fast and loose with other people’s money. It sullies the reputation of the entire organization, including all the hardworking faculty and staff at UW-Stout who want nothing more than to provide students with the best education possible and take the polytechnic university to new heights.

Reasonable people will conclude that this is an isolated case involving one individual and is not a reflection of anyone else. The audit recommends annual audits of this position to ensure such behavior
doesn’t happen again. If there’s a lesson for the university, it’s to make sure expenses are monitored closely and regularly so any possible discrepancies are flagged quickly.

The larger lesson is that if caught, one always can repay the money, but you can’t buy back your reputation, which for most of us is worth more than a tank of gas or a Star Wars toy.

The other thing that makes this all the more regrettable for Nieskes was his decision that he couldn’t get by on $145,000 a year.

— Don Huebscher, editor