Reputational Risk: A Danger to Whom?

The Chronicle of Higher Education's Jennifer Howard offered [a report entitled](), "Worried About Messages, Colleges Scrutinize Social Media."

Ms. Howard reports "[a]s colleges take a greater interest in what employees do online as part of their work … [h]ow to handle social media has become a popular topic at conferences for administrators…" Administrators worry that a visitor "encountering a negative comment thread … could turn off a student or donor." Put bluntly, an administrator said, "reputational risk"—any threat to the university's reputation—"is probably the biggest risk."

Almost a decade ago, a coauthor and I wrote an article (Who's reading your office email? Is It Legal?) that reported that whoever owns the server---a university, business, government---makes the rules for its use and has the legal right to monitor messages on it. [USMers, remember former President Thames monitoring faculty emails and the fuss it created?] We were trying to warn naive users and were surprised how few understood their risk.

Another warning seems appropriate. University administrators are not apt to know how to handle criticism. In any environment. They embrace freedom of speech in theory but not in practice. And if they are worried that "reputational risk"—any threat to the university's reputation—"is probably the biggest risk [for universities]," folks who use university servers will suffer. Do you want your life, your career, in the hands of an administrator who interprets what "university reputation" means?