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Our University – Free Inquiry

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Our University – Free Inquiry

Universities work best in the difficult, contentious, unfettered mode that allows free inquiry. Mysterious from within and without. It is their nature.

When faculty members are critical of administration, students are rambunctious, and complex discourse erupts on campus, all is uncomfortably well in the academy. These are not distractions to free inquiry. Systematic suspicion and scrutiny are the rugged but stable bedrock on which free inquiry is constructed.

The best universities are American according to respected world rankings by the Times Higher Education Supplement. Of the top twenty in the world, fourteen are U.S. institutions, Michigan the only public.

Campuses, especially the publics, are becoming vast bureaucracies, with a political look and feel focused on form and process rather than teaching and learning, in short, political organizations.

Clout reigns high in political organizations. In universities all over the nation, boards and leadership are being identified not because they understand learning organizations but because they know somebody, and frequently have contributed something to that somebody, or some other somebody whom the “somebody” appreciates. It is a longstanding national trend.

Political ideology crushes free inquiry. Protections are required. No news here - protections were needed to mediate between the potentially conflicting forces of church doctrine and free inquiry 500 years ago. Now protections are needed not from the ecclesiastical perspective of the founding body, but the body politic.

Americans value higher education, always have. After the pilgrims arrived, Harvard was established as towns were being built. Within a few decades the concentration of people with advanced education in New England was the highest in the world... in this infant colony.

Harvard was Massachusetts's University, not really private, and not really public. People viewed it as “their” university, a public good with a public benefit, even though there was no state funding. This belief was so strong that it hampered the development of public higher education in the state, and it is fair to say that Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and Columbia had a similar impact on higher education in their states.

Public good means greater access, a good thing for sure, especially from a political perspective. In some cases open access is a hurdle in the pursuit of excellence. The City College of New York and the University of Paris (The Sorbonne) are two examples of open admissions nearly devastating once great

institutions. Thankfully, the return of common sense led to a resurgence of academic quality driven by free inquiry.

We need not look so far from home. What positive academic impact can preferred political admissions have on free inquiry and intellectual acumen at the University of Illinois? And look what is at stake. According to world rankings by the Times, Illinois ranks 71 on the list overall and 20 in the prestigious tally of Engineering and Information Technology - wedged between Harvard and the University of Tokyo.

Learning organizations that transform into political organizations become poor manifestations of both. Universities will be hobbled if they sacrifice the high and right minded concept of seeking truth in academic endeavors at the altar of expediency of any type.

Phil Baty of the London Times reports that, "Anglo-American dominance of the international student market could be challenged by the emergence of new global power blocks in higher education." I would argue that these power blocks are being built on the model of higher learning based on free inquiry, the Anglo-American model, which may be disappearing.

Other pundits have suggested in the past decade that privatizing state research universities could solve the problem. Put state appropriations into scholarships based on combinations of merit and need. Really?

In a learning organization free inquiry is king even when consternation and discomfort abound. These are simultaneously the cost and benefit of free inquiry.

And as American as apple pie.