

10-2009

Our University – Numbness and Hoarseness

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University – Numbness and Hoarseness" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 20.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/20

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Our University – Numbness and Hoarseness

Trade unionism is an old concept and unions exist for very good reasons. In work environments where the safety of workers is tenuous and the motivation for profit is high, coal mines or steel mills for example, unions create an essential set of checks and balances that mediate the sometimes competing forces of individual rights and protections of many, against the profit motive of a few. I am not sure these forces always compete detrimentally but, most assuredly, sometimes they do.

Likewise, in environments where mass production is the goal and standardization the key to success, unions protect from mandated, slavish dedication to repetitive tasks injurious to workers either physically or emotionally. Unions make great sense there too. For example, in the clothing manufacturing industries on- and off-shore, where something like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory calamity of March 25, 1911, might repeat itself, trade unionism will thrive.

And it should.

Combating deleterious greed by profit-motivated individuals who care little or nothing for the people who work for them is a battle that needs to be fought.

There are tasks on a university campus where the goals of human safety and standardization of result are important.

There is one task on campus where standardization is categorically opposed to the work at hand and threat of injury slight - it is the role of the professor.

Passion prevails over process and protection in professing.

The only safety hazards are numbness in the legs from too much sitting and hoarseness in the throat from too much talking. I know because I have been plagued by both from time to time.

If a research university graduates 100 students and any two of those students end up as duplicates, the university has completely failed at least one of them, possibly both. There is risk in education: It may not work, or take, but standardization is undesirable and antithetical.

Faculty members must have complete freedom to express themselves in their areas of expertise without fear of retribution so students can grow. That is what tenure is for, and it works like a charm. Nothing else is needed.

Unions exist to make sure that everyone is treated in a safe and like manner, and that the work process/product is consistent. In other words, there is routinization that impacts the very nature of what is produced.

Routinization dulls distinctiveness. It can be no other way.

Nothing will take the breath out of a university faster than an effort to treat everyone equally, regardless of result. This is true for students and faculty. If we treat any two the same we mistreat at least one.

Fairness and equality are not equivalent save for simpleminded views of each. Fairness requires we treat each differently based on personal need, circumstance, experience, aspiration and achievement. Equality allows none of that. These opposing forces must be mediated by wisdom.

If the provision of a safety net ensures some milquetoast definition of success and defines quality in such a way that everyone meets it, there is no university. If the purpose of the university is to assist students in fully realizing their unique potential, the liberty to sink or soar must be real, cannot be understated, and cannot be bargained out of the process for anyone under any circumstance.

No sure thing here, guarantees are non-existent.

At our university we must seek, above all else, excellence in human achievement with the accompanying risk...even if it leads to occasional numbness and hoarseness.