

3-2009

Our University – Stimulus

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University – Stimulus" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 38.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/38

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our University – Stimulus

Walter V. Wendler

The most powerful stimulus ever invented, used for good and evil since the beginning of time, and producing both astoundingly positive results and the greatest tragedies in human history, creating vast wealth and pervasive poverty, leading to fulfillment or failure, is competition in a free environment.

Adam Smith I am not. But I keep both eyes open and this is what I see.

American higher education has been the most stimulating form of post secondary learning in the world for the past century. Credit the Morrill Act during the Civil War, the German polytechnics and the quest to produce new knowledge, and the pioneering leaders at universities like Harvard, Michigan, and Chicago, who transformed the idea of universities as places to cultivate gentlemen, into places to generate knowledge and apply it to real problems.

Some things never change.

Study might lead to a cure for cancer, a faster computer, or stronger, more drought resistant crops. The really powerful university recognizes the sustained importance of attending to real problems as well as the more elusive aspects of the human condition joy, fulfillment, faith, and other liberating aspects of our daily existence.

The agendas addressed at a university are driven by a number of forces. Current events have created a surge of curriculum and research initiatives addressing issues of terrorism and weapons technology and insurgency warfare. Simultaneously, faculty and students study the ramifications of belief systems and their impact on world, national, state, city, and family order.

Universities need freedom to engage what they believe to be important. And they don't need government stimulus, but rather freedom from government intervention. Any stimulating resource given by one group of people to another creates a quid pro quo. We see it in the political circles of Illinois and Washington D.C. all the time.

Universities should compete for everything they have. By everything I mean knowledge and insight: the real currency for institutions like ours. The competition is not necessarily for resources, but rather for ideas. If resources that generate ideas come too easily, the pursuit of new ideas falters.

Good ideas always generate resources, but resources will not always generate good ideas. Stimuli other than good ideas are redundant at good universities.

So it is with our students, a level field in the pursuit of knowledge and insight. If you look carefully at the concept of grade inflation, you will see that its rise over the past fifty years has led to degradation in the quality of student work, and similar diminution of a student's ability to perform, even though the grades are going up. At some institutions the average grades are B+.

Life is always graded on a curve and in its absence inspiration evaporates.

When we give students access to federal loans, access that has not always been earned by performance in high school, we create a burden of debt that cannot be assuaged with high grades. As higher education has become a property right rather than an opportunity, students graduate to fewer jobs with greater debt and less skill than ever before.

The students are not stupid. I find them smart. However, leadership at every level is robbing them of the right to fail, and may soon institutionalize this crime as national policy.

Freedom to fail is the genesis of competition and ultimately, the most potent stimulus package available.

According to Blaise Pascal, *"Tyranny is the wish to have in one way what can only be had in another."*