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Our University – Unfairness

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Our University – Unfairness

The world is unfair. People without resources are denied access to higher education. No matter how low tuition is, it is still out of reach for some. *Inside Higher Ed* ran a story recently about a program at Tulsa Community College called Tulsa Achieves that allows students to attend tuition-free so that they have an opportunity to attend college no matter their high school performance or their ability to pay.

The people in Tulsa have bought into the philosophy of Frank Sinatra, the Ink Spots, Sam Cook, and Janet Jackson... “*The Best Things in Life Are Free.*”

Some students succeed. Of course they had the same chance to succeed in high school, which might have helped them succeed in college, possibly even provided financial support, but they got another chance, and succeeded.

This is good.

Low tuition and fees are important, but still unfair. Even a modest cost, say a dozen pairs of Nikes over a two-year period, is too much.

To be fair, you have to give away the opportunity that college affords, which is not that affordable evidently as many private for-profit institutions are graduating people with skills of low utility, and backpacks stuffed with debt and degrees of questionable value.

Life is surely unfair.

Maybe the ancient Chinese knew something the song-masters did not. “*Yi fen qian, yi fen huo*”, literally meaning: “for one cent you get one cents worth of merchandise”, i.e. you get what you pay for.

People say it is unfair to burden the beneficiary of opportunity the university provides, with any commitment at all.

In France, President Sarkozy has introduced a plan called *egalite des chances*, “freedom of opportunity”. A French version of affirmative action for college admissions. It sounds better in French.

This allows any French student who does well on the national exam to get into the elite schools in the French system, the *grande ecoles*.

There is a hook though. Students must take a test to determine academic ability, which is unfair for all of life’s circumstances.

Meritocracy will not work either. It is unfair.

Georgia's "Hope Scholarship" program was the envy of the nation a decade ago; make a "B" average and attend college tuition-free. Enrollment rose by 100,000 students over a few years.

For the free tuition you have to maintain a "B" average. This is unfair.

Statewide, Georgia achieves a 6 year 60% graduation rate, near the national average, but few other states have made the dramatic commitment to free tuition that Georgia did, according to the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

Free, coupled with purported achievement, didn't work as well as Georgians hoped. That is unfair.

Life is unfair. Students with no money have a hard time getting through college. Ostensibly, students with money have an easy go of it. Students with high ability get help and succeed. All unfair.

What you give away has little value in spite of ol' blue-eyes pronouncements. What you earn has higher value: unfair to be sure, but right.

Localized decision making, at the level closest to the student, will produce the best results. But, that takes faith in people who work directly with students every day. And leadership and management energy in universities are pushing in the opposite direction, working to separate the important decision of who gets in and who does not, from the people who know best.

Faculty members will make better decisions about student ability than any system, process, or code.

Leadership and accountability for results by deans and chairs will produce a powerful result if it is loosed, at our university and every other.

In the workings of local leadership and action resides imperfection, but more fairness.