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Our University – The Suspension of Disbelief

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Our University – The Suspension of Disbelief

The suspension of disbelief was a literary device first identified by Samuel Taylor Coleridge to refer to the challenges that readers faced in accepting the assertions of an author to make a story work. The same concept is now demanded of movie goers and video game players in order to bring these entertainment venues to life. Black and white films required that viewers suspend disbelief; after all, the world is not seen in black and white except by those with vision imperfections.

In universities, we are asked to suspend disbelief all the time. We are asked to believe that quality can be maintained or increased while resources are diminished.

We are asked to believe that we can remain unchanged in the face of state governments that systematically demand more in terms of patronage, bureaucratic and regulatory oversight, bloated employment rolls, retirement and pension systems.

When full-time faculty members are traded out for part-time faculty members, qualifications notwithstanding, we are asked to believe that we can deliver the same attentive concern, instruction, and advice to our students.

As budgets are reduced we are asked to absorb reductions while not reducing work forces or increasing costs to students.

But this is not about budgets; they are just such an easy target that it is hard to pass them by without a shot or two.

I would like to point out the value of suspending disbelief so that new ideas can be tried.

I remember sitting in a boardroom filled with university executives and listening to someone propose a new idea. You would think such an occurrence would be common, welcome, and acceptable at a university, even if it required the suspension of disbelief to hear out the thought, to roll it around, to get a sense of whether or not there was a kernel of brilliance or innovation that might benefit the university in its mission to serve students.

That did not happen.

Instead, the executives each took their turn quickly, and with great practice, explaining why the idea would not work. They did it with a flair for excellence, precision, and practice in supporting broken processes and procedures. Their protection of turf and diminishment of critical and creative thought was so

remarkable it would have made a near-retirement bureaucrat blush with pride. They had become experts at never suspending disbelief. Not for a split second.

Instead, the clarion call was, “We have not done it that way and we shouldn’t start now”, or “This regulation won’t allow that”, or “The state would object.”

The impact on progress was palpable.

The trickle into other segments of the university was guaranteed.

The mindlessness of such approaches to new ideas is incongruent with what a university should be about, yet, it happens over and over again.

One day, in a moment of frustration I told a group, “You could beat the life out of a new idea faster than any group of people I had ever seen.”

Why?

Are people afraid to change?

Has the state teat made us willingly accept a broken, calcified system rather than embrace creativity and entrepreneurial gumption that should be the pith of university life for faculty and students?

Have we trained ourselves, and therefore those in our charge, to embrace the status quo when in fact it needs to be examined critically and perpetually?

If there is any truth in this, only pronounced and assertive leadership will make the university a place where disbelief is suspended in the cause of excellence.

But, such leadership fosters fear. The certainty of current circumstance is more comforting than the insecurity of progress.