

8-16-2010

Our University – What’s the Big Idea?

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University – What’s the Big Idea?" (2010). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 67.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/67

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Our University – What's the Big Idea?

Fall comes with anticipation. Even the crustiest university people get excited about seeing students return.

A shot in the arm of the local economy is always welcome, but the excitement of seeing new faces painted with anticipation, fear, hope, and expectation is the fuel for the machine. Life experience can dull expectation. Save faith discoveries, marriage, childbirth, and serious illness, little is more powerful to the future than what happens at the university.

We see it on the faces of freshmen.

In talking with new students and families, anticipation is thick in the air and welded to the anxiously awaited university experience. I ask myself. "What am I doing here?"

"Shouldn't he know the answer to that?" you ask.

I fear at times that I am complacent about what it is we are doing, and I may not be alone. We lose sight of the big ideas. We focus on form and process rather than function and substance.

These kids know what the university is about, and can prove it if we let them.

What is the difference between a zygote and an embryo? Who was/is Jesus Christ? Muhammad? Charles Darwin? How did Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer differ? How do their ideas impact modern economics and political theory? What is American exceptionalism? Can science and ethics be mixed? Did Dr. Spock and Captain Kirk know the answers to these queries? Do these ideas form the pith of personal and political, individual and institutional struggles on earth?

Watered down big ideas wholly disserve students.

Good undergraduates are capable of working through complex concepts and putting them in the context of their world views. Some people would say this is the job of the core curriculum. I think not. The core curriculum helps, but it is too limited and too detached from individual belief and understanding.

In a talk, Charles Vest, President Emeritus of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, lamented the fact that electrical engineering students at MIT could discuss the nuances of quarks all day long, and solve quadratic equations, as did Jewish mathematician Abraham bar Hiyya Ha-Nasi in the 12th century, while on a coffee break but they couldn't fix a broken toaster.

This is a legitimate observation if for no other reason than Charles Vest offered it.

He did not suggest that if engineering students could fix toasters they would be good engineers, but that somehow knotting together big ideas with underlying concepts and practical issues was central to engineering education. And at MIT, the knot was loose.

Bingo.

Many universities get lost in the middle. We want our students to be useful in the market place, so we bring in appliances all day long for students to fix, and consequently make technicians of them.

Or, we fall in the ditch on the other side of the road and teach them to be world class mathematicians or physicists, theologians or philosophers, but they can't diagnose a simple mechanical problem.

So we are in no-man's land between being able to think, and being able to do. The fundamentally flawed notion is that these divisions of human capacity should be divorced and not interdependent in every way.

We must confront students with big ideas and simultaneously encourage learners to bring utility to their life equation. Build a house, fix a toaster, and stitch up a cut, but understand the relationship between the pragmatic skills required and the larger economic, social, theological, and intellectual perspectives of the day.

This is what distinguishes a university from a trade school. I see it in the eyes of students and their families.

At our university thinking and doing must be the big idea. One without the other is shallow water.