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Our University: Private and Public Benefit

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Our University: Private and Public Benefit

University leaders who politicize intention and talk about public benefit and public purpose as primary mission show a complete lack of understanding of institutions learning in a free market. We exist to tirelessly serve students.

Here is an inconvenient truth:

I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.

Adam Smith

I remember seeing an interview with a bluegrass player who was asked how he practiced to be able to play such lightning-fast runs. He replied that he didn't practice for speed. He practiced for precision. Speed just happened as a consequence of being able to put each note exactly where it belonged.

Universities provide great benefits to society. But these benefits occur as a consequence of the effect universities have on their students, not through direct action. Society benefits when citizens are able to critically evaluate the world around them, to reason clearly, to communicate ideas effectively and to see beyond the immediate gratification of their wants.

When a university, through patronage or other coercion, becomes an arm of a political body, whether that body is corporate, governmental, or union, it cannot maintain its focus where it belongs . . . on its students.

But, when universities have the freedom to define themselves through their mission and methods, a marketplace of educational opportunities can develop from which students and their families can match resources, skills, and learning styles to provide the greatest benefit to the development of the individual student.

Universities need freedom to deliver their best educational efforts to students, without being responsible for some ulterior, political motive. They need the freedom to generate new knowledge and to serve the community in ways that benefit students, faculty, and the community, in that order. They must also be free to fail, with leadership willing to identify and purge failing strategies. Evolution requires that resources follow successful innovation.

Judgment, professional insight, and courage are required. Politically driven forces and organizations constantly seek to redefine metrics of performance as a way of maintaining status quo. The only metrics that really matter though are the satisfaction

and success of the universities graduates. Success cannot be measured into existence; it comes from diligent and tireless effort.

Universities are not like other state agencies. Students are not roads, though they are occasionally walked on by institutions that do not deliver on their promises. Universities sing or sigh based on perceived benefit and performance.

When universities pursue efficiencies to the point of cheapness, the quality of the institution begins a slow and painful process of erosion.

The great benefit of universities is private and realized in the success of individual students. For that, students and families are willing to pay. Check enrollment at top-tier private and public universities. They are surging to record highs despite increased costs.

When a university fails its students, it should expect reductions in support for its educational model, not make arguments about job security or social value and public responsibility. Such rhetorical riffs should be saved for something less central to the health of community and nation.

There will be ancillary benefits energized by a commitment to students: Communities will benefit from new ideas. These ideas create new markets, new economic development, and new insights. But none of these public benefits will be realized without full recognition of the centrality of the private benefit of helping students become productive citizens.

Average and good universities engage excellent faculty who produce work that benefits society. Great universities engage excellent faculty who work diligently to produce graduates who benefit society. These seemingly identical but dramatically different motivating forces separate average from excellent.

Too often, we see universities skidding downhill screaming about social purpose, because they have not proven their value to their own graduates by helping them become who they always wanted to be.

Great institutions provide private benefit that evolves into public benefit. I believe Mr. Smith was correct.

I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.