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Our Universities: Serving Whom

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Our Universities: Serving Whom

Universities must change.

The culture of college needs to evolve, particularly with regard to "perverse institutional incentives" that reward colleges for enrolling and retaining students rather than for educating them. "It's a problem when higher education is driven by a student client model and institutions are chasing after bodies," he said.

Richard Arum quoted in *Inside Higher Ed* January 18, 2011 by Scott Jaschik

The publication of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in January, 2011 created a stir as if the ivy on those ivy-covered halls was of the poison variety.

Arum and Roksa ask a simple question, "Are people getting their money's worth from universities?" Their answer is not pretty.

Students are leaving school with loans that are equal to the cost of median priced homes in many states. But data indicate that many undergraduate students don't receive the preparation they need for a life and career that would make their investment in a degree worthwhile or profitable. A recent New Yorker cartoon has a physician peering through an otoscope into the ear of a college graduate and the impression is the good doctor can see daylight coming through from the other side.

Ouch!

Students are not challenged but are instead given passes for mediocre effort and dull results. This experience fails students, by not reflecting the fact that they will be held to standards later on, and giving them a false impression of the connection between work and success.

A university's purpose is to change the way people think, and students seem to want as little bang for their buck as they can get. They would never buy a Camero or Mustang the way they buy a university education. But they indenture themselves through loans with our blessings.

Arum and Roksa argue that students are not learning critical thinking and problem solving skills - the hallmarks of being educated. Not to put too fine a point on it, but being educated has little to do with being certified or having attended university. We have bought our own sales pitch; that everyone needs a college degree because... (Go to any university website and fill in the blank)

Has education supplanted home-ownership as the new American dream? Any student drowning in debt and under-employed will tell you it's more like a nightmare.

So many paying so much, which for too many means too little.

Education accentuates and sharpens who a person is and how they relate to the world around them, as well as how they think. Going to college can help a disciplined student learn to think freely, critically, and creatively, and show them ways to reach their potential if they are willing to put in the effort. However, simply having shown up for classes doesn't guarantee that a student will be seen as fit for any particular job if employers start to regard a diploma as nothing more than a certificate of attendance.

Post secondary education serves more people than ever before. In the mid 1940's there were just over 1 million students enrolled. Now, there are 15 million. Having college or a degree on a resume doesn't set a student apart the way it once did.

It seems to come down to a wicked combination of entitlement, availability and good, but twisted, hearts. Appropriate post secondary education is of great value to anyone, if they seek a career where it is required. Driving a cab in New York requires neither fluency in Farsi or a PhD, although it appears to. Fearlessness and a lack of self-preservation are the primary job requirements.

Serving whom is the pertinent question for educational leaders. Our primary duty must always be to students. If we focus on serving the state by providing an educated workforce we are off-mission. If we focus on serving elected officials by creating jobs, we are off-mission. If we focus on serving the bureaucracy of public higher education by expanding the market for what we offer, we are off-mission.

These are important secondary effects, not primary purpose.

We need to doggedly serve students and everything else will fall into place. Telling students they are qualified when not, educated when only enrolled, graduated when only matriculated, serves no individual or institution well.