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Our Universities: Whining versus Winning

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Our Universities: No Fear

Fearless, confident leadership is required in our universities. Leaders focused on academic excellence and student success will eventually prevail, but it may not be pretty between now and then as fearlessness is a scarce commodity in the face of subvention and capitation.

No episode was more important in shaping the outlook and expectations of American higher education during those years (the late 19th century) than the founding of the University of Chicago, one of those events in American history that brought into focus the spirit of an age.

Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History*

William Harper Rainey was picked by John D. Rockefeller to be the founding president of the University of Chicago in 1891. Initially a Baptist university, in recognition of Rockefeller's faith tradition, Chicago became secular. A few years ago, a jurist, who happened to be Jewish, told me he thought Rockefeller might be rolling in his grave as the Baptists at the University of Chicago were likely to be seated between a Jew and a Catholic. But I think Rockefeller would be proud of the impact of his kicking down the doors of exclusivity while simultaneously opening the doors of excellence by giving a wheelbarrow full of money to midwife a premiere university on Chicago's south side.

Rainey, with Rockefeller's cash and concurrence, set out to build a great university. He saw that many students were ill-prepared for the academic rigors of study at the university level. But he also recognized that among them were people with the innate intelligence for a university career who only lacked that all-important preparation.

Rainey understood the potential cost both to the students and the institution if students who lacked the tools to rise to the academic rigors of a research institution were admitted in the 19th century.

In the 21st century, according to Mark Schneider and Lu (Michelle) Yin of the American Institutes for Research, students who started in fall 2002 as full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree but failed to graduate six years later, cost the nation approximately \$3.8 billion in lost income; \$566 million in lost federal income taxes; and \$164 million in lost state income taxes. High schools can't fix the problem; they are too busy making sure they leave no child behind. Universities can't; they are too busy being socially responsible giving students who have not earned it, a chance.

Rainey, not Rockefeller, is rolling in his grave.

In 1901, President Rainey, with J. Stanley Brown, Superintendent of Joliet High School, worked to found Joliet Junior College, the first junior college in the nation, to get students ready for the university.

A century later, this collaboration has evolved into “dual credit”.

High schools nationwide are offering courses through community colleges that earn students both high school and college credit, potentially reaching their higher education goals sooner and at a lower cost. This integrated practice avoids many of the pitfalls of distance learning, including inadequate feedback or a lack of student experience with self-motivation.

Weak fearful leaders see reduced market. Shame on them. A university’s job is to educate, not corner a market. What is market share for a university anyway? Leave that to Macy’s: Don’t put socks and underwear in the same drawer as sound education.

However, universities must be able to trust that community colleges are adequately preparing students for advanced study. Community colleges that embrace their role with baccalaureate-bound students could set a national benchmark for a system of colleges like the City Colleges of Chicago if they will leave distractions aside. Preparing students for transfer to good universities is a high calling, not a consolation prize.

Fear of encroachment decreases when missions are clearly defined. This lets a university increase access and diversity, reduce cost, and level out differences in the preparedness of graduates from high schools where seemingly, as in Lake Wobegone, “all the children are above average.”

A recent review of students in the junior year of a public school of architecture reveals that over half are community college transfers. This suggests that community colleges may be better at determining whether a student will be successful in upper division study at a university than that university’s own admission standards for entering freshmen.

Universities do a disservice to themselves and the state when policies focus on head count, rather than on a commitment to developing their students for the lives that come after graduation. We must recognize that no single environment can be all things to all people, and that we must let others do their jobs while we focus on our own.

No fear - save the fear of ignorance.