

12-7-2011

Our Universities: Mission Evolution? Nay. Revolution!

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Mission Evolution? Nay. Revolution!" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 128.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/128

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our Universities: Mission Evolution? Nay. Revolution!

Universities must change dramatically to meet the evolving needs of their students and the workplace. But, in the process, they must not abandon their roots as places that develop the human capacity for thinking and taking action for the betterment of society.

According to C. Anderson in "Prescribing the Life of the Mind," the University is expected to enculturate (i.e., pass on a tradition), citizen-ize (i.e., make students Americans, introduce living, working, moving in society), prepare (for career, social mobility, "place" in economy/society, character-ize (i.e., instill "Qualities of soul").

From an internet post by Tom Grosh March 11, 2009

Arne Duncan, U.S. secretary of education recently reflected on the seriousness of the escalating cost of college attendance and its impact on students. Secretary Duncan sees things others miss, like how merit pay is central among the changes that will make universities more effective. I don't know how he feels about student preparedness, but it is as important to the effectiveness equation as recognizing and rewarding excellence.

Two misconceptions keep arising.

First, that the financial problems facing our universities can be solved by increasing enrollment. Wrong. Accepting unprepared students does nothing to improve university fiscal performance, instead creating a further drain on university resources. Moreover, it encourages people to believe a classist lie... "In order to be successful you must be like me...It would be better to risk a one-way ticket to debtor's prison than not achieve my kind of success."

Institutional and governmental requirements to drag, push or carry those who cannot achieve academically have confounded the fundamental academic mission. Some now believe that a university degree, itself, rather than the opportunity to earn one, is a civil or economic right. Wrong. Universities are transformative for those qualified for admission; but transformation is hard work, and universities shortchange real students when they agonize over the amusement, entertainment and pipe dreams of "students" who believe it should be easy. My grandmother, in her broken English with her fourth grade Sicilian education taught us that the purpose of the university is to change the way people think.

Tending to students who are only exercising a perceived "right," rather than making themselves worthy of a degree, undermines university cost effectiveness far more than well-appointed buildings, exorbitant salaries, or irresponsible contracts.

The second misconception is that the financial problems that face our universities can be solved by cutting costs. Wrong again. There are only so many ways to reduce costs: Reduce staff numbers or wages, or both. Buying fewer products, less dinnerware, cheaper paper, using energy carefully . . . these are already in place in most institutions and have been for decades. We've reached the point where there's little fat left in the budget, and the easy choices have already been implemented.

Duncan's proposals leave the majority of universities largely, "the way they were." However, fundamental changes are needed that address core missions, and recognize that universities are going to have to change dramatically.

The wheat - academic purpose - must be separated from the chaff – everything else.

Duncan cited the example of Western Governors University, an on-line institution providing skills-based assessment of students, rather than simply counting the number of hours they have taken. This is an interesting proposition, but unsatisfying to many students who want something akin to the university experiences they know from their parents and popular culture.

Food services have been outsourced at many universities. Lawn care, motor pools, building maintenance, housing, and all other non-academic work . . . including sports management, fire protection and public safety . . . must also be considered as areas for external management. Efficiency, not politics, must drive how universities obtain these necessary but peripheral services, so that the university can free energy and focus for its core mission. The success of online universities is at least partially attributable to offloading these expenses by doing away with campuses. Western Governors University instead offers a chimera of the campus experience, a picture of a building on its website. The University of Phoenix owns a football stadium, sans the coach and athletes.

Marketing mirages.

Current budgets rely on students with a small likelihood of academic success taking out loans requiring 50 years of amortization, to prepare for jobs that don't exist. It is a mess.

The financial tactics of universities must change. Campuses must change. Students' expectations, along with those of politicians, parents, professors, and university leadership must change. Many will fight for traditions they find comforting, but, when money runs low, you have to figure out what's most important and cut back everywhere else. Nibbling around the edges of university budgets is no longer an option.