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Our Universities: Sowing and Reaping

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Our Universities: Sowing and Reaping

The best ideas confront common sense with a baseball bat. They defy logic because we cannot see beyond overly simplistic views of how things work. If you give something away it must have little or no value. Right?

Wake the power within thee slumbering, trim the plot that's in thy keeping, thou wilt bless the task when reaping sweet labour's prize.

John Stuart Blackie

Every once in a while, a person or institution comes along that really does know its purpose in this world. This is so rare that many of us don't see it when it occurs, can't judge its value if we do, and certainly cannot imagine how "they" can do this.

Case in point: MIT. MIT is not new to innovation. It could be argued that MIT was the intellectual furnace of the industrial revolution. It is well-known that MIT brought the German and European models of Polytechnic higher education to the United States, which bred what we now refer to as the modern research university. By so doing it became the model of the University as an economic development engine. The market culture of MIT has created, in aggregate, what would rank as the 11th largest economy in the world, according to Ericka Chickowski in the September 20, 2010 piece "**Gurus and Grads**".

All of this economic activity was not generated through capitation; MIT barely clears 10,000 students in headcount. This economic cornucopia is the child of big ideas that are developed by scores of the world's best scholars and brightest students, and realized through the strength of entrepreneurs, risk takers, intellectual leaders, and people committed to making a difference.

The biggest new idea, the aggregate effect of which is right now incalculable, deals not with science, engineering, or high-energy particle physics, but instead from a calculus of generosity, and an unshakable sense of institutional self.

MIT, in its genius, has realized that, as vital as its course materials are, they are not the meat of what defines a university.

What differentiates the University's institutional role from other educational resources lies not in the artifacts of the classroom, but in those processes that preceded their creation and are honed by their promulgation; the interaction between good, clear-headed research and teaching faculty working both with each other and motivated, capable students. The value this creates is so high that not only students, but business and industrial leaders as well come from every corner of the globe to Cambridge. They come because they understand that this intellectual discourse is where a University's unique value is created. Knowledge is advanced most efficiently and successfully through processes that are inherently social. Ideas grow when they are bandied about, and MIT's program pursues this both among its own, and with the greater community of scholars and students who use their materials.

That's why they have chosen to give away the artifacts of scholarship over the Internet.

For free.

MIT is not alone. Stanford is doing essentially the same thing. Some predict that such actions will have a significant impact on online education, and subsequently drive down the high costs of courses proffered by the for-profits, as students become more aware of what is and is not offered in a typical, self-paced online experience.

It is interesting that private universities, MIT and Stanford, lead the way. Many public institutions are offering online courses, but their motive is driven by a bottom line, cost-cutting, accounting perspective, rather than a visionary, academic dream. I think it's safe to say, that MIT and Stanford understand the bottom line better than most public universities. They have a dream, and understanding of purpose of the University that transcends making ends meet, and monthly balance sheets.

Their mission is not only to sustain themselves but to sustain the world of ideas.

When universities, public or private, are committed with passion to a unique mission, they too will be able to give away coursework, and the economic impact will be positive for the universities themselves, for education generally, and for the greater world as broader engagement in the questions of the day lead to new perspectives and alternative answers.

An active economy, whether commercial or intellectual, raises the prospects of all who participate in it.

Our universities must above all else understand their unique purpose in the world. When they do they too will be able to give away what they think they possess but merely hold in trust, and the natural law of sowing and reaping will sustain them.