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## Our Universities: Rockin' Robin

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## Our Universities: Rockin' Robin

We tend to find what we look for. You know the old expression, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Those students who look for an intellectual challenge find it... most universities willingly oblige them. Students who look for an easy path find it. Most universities oblige them also.

*"The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds the most discoveries, is not "Eureka!" (I found it!) but "That's funny..."*

*Isaac Asimov*

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Few things are more critical to the success of a student in higher education than genuine, unabated curiosity. While you still find bright, motivated students on campus, it seems like the general level of curiosity among young people is decreasing.

Children used to trail around behind their parents asking questions. Many lessons began, "Mommy, how do they . . .?" or, "Daddy, why is it that . . .?" I know this still happens, but children seem to enter youth culture earlier than they used to, and, when they ask their questions, they expect a dry wiki-answer, rather than an impromptu experiment; or a discussion that ties new knowledge back to other things they've learned. They get discrete facts; and only the answers they know to ask for. Moreover, they seem reticent to take ownership of discovery.

It would be unfair to blame students for the environment in which they live. When something comes easily, we don't tend to value it as highly, and with current technology, it's almost never necessary to make too much of an investment to track down even the most obscure bit of information.

This is not the only force at work against curiosity. One of the most pernicious is the tacit devaluation of reading and writing skills. We think in words. We theorize, we discuss, we debate, we archive, we question, and some would say we build our world using language. Yet, somehow, we've failed to explain to students the importance of language as a tool not only for transmitting facts but also for discovering meaning.

Leon René wrote Rockin' Robin and Bobby Day recorded it in 1958. They helped rhythm overtake words as a form of knowing and meaning.

P.J. O'Rourke's piece in the Weekly Standard a few years ago, ***Twittering The Constitution: All The Founding Fathers Go Tweet, Tweet, Tweet***, suggested what the constitution might look like if it was tweeted. Here is a tweetable Bill of Rights in 115 characters. To paraphrase Rene Descartes, the father of modern curiosity— the whole ball of wax.

*Flame on -church+guns. No Gl's n cribz. No frisk w/o ProbCawz Due Pross rox  
Plea5th Get off my lawn SpeedTrialz w/jur&shystr. Pwr 2 D Peeps.*

The reading and comprehension ability of college students has decreased markedly over the past few decades. I find the following facts, published by the National High School Center in January 2009, unsettling:

- Over the last 15 years, 15 million students have graduated from high school reading at below the basic level.
- The percentage of high school seniors performing at or above the basic level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) decreased from 80% in 1992 to 73% in 2005, and the percentage performing at or above the proficient level decreased from 40% to 35%.
- About 70% of high school students need some form of remediation; the most common problem is that students cannot comprehend the words they read—not that they cannot read them.
- Scores declined on each of NAEP's three "reading contexts" between 1992 and 2005. There was a 2-point decline in reading for information, a 6-point decline in reading to perform a task, and a 12-point decline in reading for literary experience over this period.

People who have a habit of curiosity live a life of discovery. Curious people ask "Why?" and, more importantly, "Why not?" From that starting point, the world can be changed. Thankfully, throughout history, men and women have taken on the challenge of reinventing the world, not only as their responsibility but also as their birthright.

Curiosity is innate in most children, but often seems to be forgotten as the all-knowing teen-age personality is manifest. I believe it can be reclaimed if modeled by people engrossed in their surroundings, engaged in constant dialog, and taking delight and pride in discovery. Discoveries are born of inquisitiveness, and they engender new questions. Curiosity is self-perpetuating and an easily acquired taste, but it must be introduced and nurtured.

Seeking answers is the foundation of scholarship. So, before teaching facts, before teaching methods, and before teaching techniques, the first job of our universities is to promote an environment that reveres and rewards curiosity.