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Our Universities: Competition

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Our Universities: Competition

Competition for ideas is unlike competition for anything else. If we compete to harvest the most gold, we find a limited supply. Fastest person, physiology sets in. Universities should compete for ideas, and those ideas will generate new resources. We should relish competition, not run from it, knowing there are no fences to limit the field of good ideas.

Public Schools too often fail because they are shielded from the very force that improves performance and sparks innovation in nearly every other human enterprise – competition.

Robert Lutz/Clark Durant

Human beings are a competitive lot. Formal athletic competitions have existed as long as recorded history, and probably much longer.

Competitions among scholars and schools have been around for almost as long. The modern university has existed since the Middle Ages, and the oldest continuously run school in the world of any kind is Chengdu Shishi High School in China, dating a few hundred years before the birth of Christ. Beyond that, we have historical accounts of the contentions between the followers of various philosophers dating back to Thales and Anaximander. However, contemporary competition for students, and the borrowed funds they bring with them, is creating a new definition of competition in the academic environment.

Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, addressed the virtue of economic competition as allocating productive resources to their most highly valued uses. Smith's concept of economic competition is infiltrating universities and undermining fundamental purpose. However, there are things of value besides money in the economy of universities. Educational institutions trade, most importantly, in ideas.

Smith's framework is inappropriate for universities because it is based on the notion that value stems from scarcity. The model fails because, 1) an idea taken up by a scholar does not preclude others from working with the same idea, and 2) there is no limit on the number of new ideas that can be created when a group of thoughtful people get together and exercise their curiosity.

In fact, while great thoughts often come from leading scholars surrounded by capable students, many times within a group of faculty and students with modest accomplishments, an idea arises from someone whose life experience has given him or her unique perspective. Just as you can power an engine from the methane produced by compost, an individual with drive can generate new ideas in a bog of old ones.

Competing for these students must be distinguished from the kind of competition that marketing firms engage in to attract some specific volume of self-funding students defined by a school's budget rather than its scholarly aspirations. Unfortunately, from time to time, merchandisers, financiers and bean counters encourage universities to relax standards to create a larger pool from which to harvest, not dreams, but dollars; not accomplishment, but accommodation.

Often, leaders assume that size will eventually produce the intellectual capital that creates a first-class university environment. A university that focuses on scholarship will always have a strong pool from which to draw students. However, institutions that believe that their reputation will automatically improve as the student body grows are misinformed. In fact, as competitive standards decrease for the sake of attracting more students, the academic quality of faculty and students sinks. And reputation follows.

An institution less concerned with student learning than with market share trivializes itself.

Good students know the score. They understand what it means when faculty quality is measured by years of service rather than success in the classroom and laboratory, and this applies equally to research universities and community colleges. There may be different ways to measure quality, but engagement in the life-of-the-mind matters to good students. Faculty members and academic units within the university that are rewarded simply for headcount will dilute student confidence in the quality and value of an institution's degrees.

A faculty senate, association or labor union that busies itself with anything other than guaranteeing the highest standards of teaching and scholarship will ultimately degrade the institution's reputation. Arguments against merit may drive union membership up for a season but also drive down a school's ability to compete for students because they cannot heartily compete for ideas.

Higher education without sustained intellectual competition is neither higher nor education. This principle also holds in a preschool, kindergarten, primary, middle, or high school. Any action that bureaucratizes environments intended to teach thinking to meet political, market, or economic demands from workers, elected officials, or other external forces, undermines institutions and the goal of expanding human knowledge.