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Our Universities: Bread and Circuses

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Our Universities: Bread and Circuses

Universities have lost their mission. Education and academic performance take a back seat to reinforcing the inflated self-concept of students and their families. We have reduced admission standards, reduced standards to progress through courses, and reduced standards of performance required to graduate. Whom do we think these are helping?

“Most [people] see education only as the means by which a person is transported from one economic plane to a higher one”.

Richard Weaver, University of Chicago

Clarence Page opined in the *Chicago Tribune* last Sunday that today’s students at public universities don’t value critical thinking. While I believe this observation is correct, I also believe it is about five decades late.

Students have been told that getting a college diploma all but guarantees happiness, wealth and success in life. Politicians and universities have made a promise that they can’t keep. They never could have kept it, because they left out the most important part of the university value equation. It’s not receiving a college diploma that matters. It’s *earning* a college *education* that makes the difference.

Robert M. Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, famously quipped, “I find that the three major administrative problems on a campus are sex for the students, athletics for the alumni, and parking for the faculty.” Unfortunately, I think President Hutchins nailed it.

On September 12, 2005, on the front page of the *Daily Egyptian*, the student newspaper at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, a reporter quoted a fellow student, writing, “. . . it's Chancellor Wendler's fault,” said [J. W.] a senior from Mount Prospect, studying marketing as he sipped a beer from a gold Coors can. ‘He's trying to make it an educational institution, but he's ruining the school.’”

The misplaced priorities of the administration of Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, were showcased in their treatment of biology professor, Dominique Homberger. She committed the unpardonable sin of giving students quizzes on materials they were assigned. And worse, she graded them. University administration intervened, and, as *USA Today* reported April 15, 2010, she was sidelined from her teaching responsibility because she was too demanding.

In *Inside Higher Ed*, Kevin Carman, dean of the College of Basic Sciences, reported that, “Professor Homberger is not being penalized in any way; her salary has not been

decreased nor has any aspect of her appointment been changed.” But what of the fundamental betrayal of students who come to a university to receive a life-changing education...and the violated calling of a committed faculty member?

In his article from March 24, 2009, in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Stuart Rojstaczer, former professor of geophysics at Duke University, observed, “Our college classrooms are filled with students who do not prepare for class. Many study less than 10 hours a week – that’s less than half the hours they spent studying 40 years ago. Paradoxically, students are spending more and more money for an education that seems to deliver less and less content.” University leaders, along with the boards that set policy for them, seem more concerned with giving students a false sense of accomplishment than with giving them the education that would allow them to actually accomplish anything.

Tragically, students have been taught that regurgitating answers on a test represents real learning. This kind of human cataloguing of facts instead represents the least valuable mental skill in which one could invest one’s efforts in today’s world. Computers have made memorizable facts accessible to anyone, at any time, with just the stroke of a few keys. It is the ability to generate new knowledge that will be valuable going forward. Creativity, critical thinking, and rhetorical skill qualify a well-educated man or woman to succeed in life. Memorizing facts qualifies you to succeed on *Jeopardy*.

I generally hold high expectations for faculty, but when university leadership is academically corrupt, faculty cannot legitimately be held accountable for the breakdown in standards. They, too, are victims of the political interest others have in providing a watered-down public university experience.

Today, nations in Asia on the western edge of the Pacific Rim are building universities based on the mid-twentieth century model that made the United States preeminent in the world of higher education. These universities require performance. They are selective. Their faculties are given the task of creating productive citizens, not potential game-show contestants.

Low expectations and threshold standards of performance create the sad situation addressed by Mr. Page.

Students and their families must demand more from our universities, and refuse to be placated with bread and circuses. They are just cheap distractions that keep the general public from recognizing that their lot in life is not actually improving.