

4-4-2012

Our Universities: Where is the Leadership?

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: Where is the Leadership?" (2012). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 144.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/144

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: Where is the Leadership?

Leonard Pitts, in an April Fool's Day editorial - no pun, just the facts - suggested that educational institutions are focused on the wrong issues. In New York's public schools, dinosaur, birthday, pepperoni, and dancing, all make the NYC Department of Education's list of forbidden utterances.

But then, America long ago forgot what education is for — a fact you can illustrate for yourself by scanning test scores, reading an online message board or stopping five people on the street to ask them when was the War of 1812. It is telling that, as we slide toward intellectual mediocrity, our greatest city busies itself trying to keep kids from being exposed to such troubling concepts as birthdays and dinosaurs.

Leonard Pitts, Syndicated Columnist

Geoff Colvin, Senior Editor-at-Large of Fortune Magazine suggests in an April 9th piece, that neither President Obama, nor likely opponent Mitt Romney, have any solution to offer the long-suffering, evidently dying, middle class. America's universities were established to create an educated workforce that would eventually strengthen and build the middle class in the United States. Education was the key, and, from the 1870s to the 1970s, universities were doing their job in creating a more technically sophisticated workforce. The greatest global epoch since the Industrial Revolution was conceived on university campuses located on the information highway, in the land of digital communication.

Sputnik's child it was. It is.

But something is happening at State U, and it is neither pleasant nor productive. Universities have become more political, and I am not talking about Henry Kissinger's quip that, *"University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small."*

That's not politics. That's human relations, and Kissinger knew that.

Instead, what is important and needs to be appreciated is the intrusion of partisan politics, patronage, cronyism, good-boyism, favoritism, nepotism, egoism, utilitarianism, all leading to a form of fatalism in the academic community.

And as Colvin points out in his Forbes piece, *"The problem is that the middle class isn't supplying the new skills that the world is demanding. We can fix that problem. We fixed it in the early 20th century and again in the 1960s after Sputnik by overhauling our education system. That is mainly a state and local job, not a federal one. Above all, it's a*

cultural change. Presidents can do a little but not a lot to make it happen." I would suggest it's the job of faculty.

Paul Fain, in *Inside Higher Ed*, addresses the issue of the completion focus at the nation's community colleges and places the blame at the feet of government, state and national, for not funding higher education at the appropriate levels.

Sorry. Too easy.

The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, a national group supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, unions, and faculty senates around the country, wants to inject a stronger voice of university faculty members in the solution to the problems.

Who can argue with this proposition? But the concerns of the group seem more focused on creating and protecting jobs for faculty - that's politics - than changing the nature of how students learn and think - that's academics. Yet, education should uncompromisingly focus on changing the way people think, not on creating influence, jobs, unearned employment security, guaranteed raises, apparent efficiencies, or anything else.

The faculty must untangle the snarled web of leadership forces that are directed towards personal and political gain rather than the academic agenda that should guide universities.

In 44 years of university life, I have never seen a bureaucrat come into a classroom and tell a faculty member what to do. I have never seen a policy or procedure manual that limits faculty members' free expression of their subject matter. Yet, faculty members are giving away their ordained responsibility to guide institutions. Some blame unions; I don't. Some blame politically appointed campus leaders; I can't. Some blame unmotivated or ill-prepared students; I won't. The professorate is responsible for the success or failure of American higher education, and if such responsibility is frittered away on trinkets and political favors, their only recourse is a look in the mirror, and rose colored glasses don't work.

When the professorate demands accountability from themselves, their institutional leadership and their students, change will occur and shepherd in a forceful new era of quality in US higher education. The celebrated Columbia caveat that fell on the ears of newly minted Columbia President Dwight Eisenhower guides - "Mr. President, we are not employees of the university. We are the university."

We should act like it.