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Our Universities: Elitism

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Our Universities: Elitism

Our universities exist to educate and separate. Education is essentially a process of separation. Ignorance is separated and eliminated through insight. Students willing to submit to the process of an education should have the opportunity. This is a social obligation, nearly a right of citizenship. However, if all succeed, everyone's effort is devalued.

Universities remain meaningful because they respond to the deepest of human needs, to the desire to understand and to explain that understanding to others.

'The Idea of a University', 2003, Lee Bollinger, President, Columbia University

By nature, no organization is more elite than a university. The goal of such institutions is to separate good ideas from bad ones, strong faculty from those wanting, well-performing students from those who don't. Without these claims of performance that lead to exclusivity, the university ceases to have any intellectual or social value at all.

High schools have figured out how to deal with the issue. They stop assigning class rank to students as it might make them feel badly if they are in the bottom half of the class. Lee Bollinger might think high schools that don't rank students are not doing the job.

The City University of New York adopted an open admissions policy allowing a student to present him or herself for admission and to begin taking classes. Without surprise, this brought many poorly and inappropriately motivated and ill-prepared students into the institution. An increasingly large proportion of the students were not well prepared. Over time, the quality of instruction declined...why would a faculty member invest time in a student who did nothing to show interest in or ability for learning. Matthew Goldstein, then Chancellor and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani ended the practice as the quality of the university that had so admirably served the City was sinking. Like a rock.

The Sorbonne approached admissions in the same way, as did many universities in Western Europe. French President Nicolas Sarkozy fought the idea and reinforced excellence and strongly competitive admissions standards as the quality of education had fallen off. Maybe too competitive, as many moderately qualified French students are now riding the train across the English Channel to study in Great Britain, according to a March 2010 story in *The Independent* by John Lichfield.

Eventually great institutions are decimated by the pervasive sense of entitlement rather than intellectual competitiveness. Acquiring knowledge requires a process that refines thinking, specifies it, separates and elevates the best ideas, rather than diminishes the thought process and its result. In this dimension, intellectual work is exactly like boxing. This view, unpopular to many, is nonetheless absolute truth of universities and how they accomplish their work. Trade schools and community colleges are different and are appropriately treated as such.

Higher education in an environment where everyone succeeds is neither higher nor educational. Such a view is always painful for those who believe that a university education is a good that can be distributed, like corn or gasoline, to satisfy anyone who comes calling. Education is a matter of performance. Elitism is the contrast of egalitarianism. Something unearned, gained by position or birth is elite. Something gained by effort is performance. Universities constituted to give anything away, under either perspective, fail.

Performance that demonstrates learning is only comfortable to those who engage education as the opportunity to improve life-changing insight through students so that they might become more thoughtful, more deliberate, more able and more learned. Any other posture is fundamentally unfair.

The most competitive universities in the United States are currently making course work available to an ever increasingly portion of the population through the Internet. And they are doing it for free. They have turned exclusivity on its head.

There is a single caveat to this free-for-all model being developed at MIT, Stanford, Michigan, Chicago, Penn and a growing number of other institutions. No credit is given. A student goes online, accesses the best thinking available at the most elite universities, and does so at no cost except for the desire to know, and the willingness to work - each a commodity too rare at times.

The motive of the institutions giving away knowledge is not clear. "Right now I have zero confidence that we could replicate a Penn education online," according to the President of the University of Pennsylvania, Amy Gutmann, in an ***Inside Higher Ed*** piece on April 18, 2012.

Soon enterprising institutions will capitalize and exploit this process and create a way, to sell the credit earned enabling learners to actually have college credits, on a transcript, for courses taken, that lead to a degree. A good step for a place like the University of Phoenix and the process would only require test writers and readers, no faculty...other than those from the best universities on the planet. Free on the internet. The hollowness of this form of elitism is breathtaking.

At our universities, we must not apologize for excellence and uphold mediocrity, but rather we should apologize for the mediocre and herald the excellent.