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# Our Universities: Spirit and Tradition

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## Our Universities: Spirit and Tradition

Good universities create community. Places of learning create a sense of belonging when they are well led, not necessarily by people in formal leadership positions, but as acts of commitment from a community's citizens and a deep yearning to connect to something larger than self.

*"Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."*

Jaroslav Jan Pelikan

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Coursera, the start-up company for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC's) at top universities, just announced hitting the one-million-student enrollment mark. Sixteen of the best universities in the world are giving away their courses. Almost 40% of the subscribing students come from the United States. While the courses are not credited on transcripts, the professors are world leaders. Eventually, an enterprising, accredited, probably a for-profit university, will begin transcription of the courses for a fee. Students will start transferring them to "State U" to meet some requirements for a campus-based degree.

Kyle Field at Texas A&M University is the home of the real 12th man, E. King Gill, not the copycat Buffalo Bills or Seattle Seahawks.

When Kyle Field was undergoing expansion at the turn of the century, the remains of the Aggie mascots, canines named Reveille, needed to be moved. Located outside of the gates at the north end zone the burial plots were oriented so the former mascots could "see" the scoreboard at the south end zone.

The remains of Reveille I, II, III, IV were moved to a nearby site to respect the memory of these pups. This, however, presented a problem only meaningful to people at a place like Texas A&M. The Reveille's, I, II, III, IV could no longer see the scoreboard from their temporary home. This would be the case until the construction was completed and the Reveille's, I, II, III, IV could be re-interred in their proper place near the entrance of the football stadium, with their own "mini-tron."

To remedy this unique predicament, during construction two members of the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets were dispatched to the temporary canine containment site for home football games. These cadets were armed with poster boards and magic markers. They were in full dress uniforms in the early fall heat, on Saturday afternoon, sweating. As the game progressed the students would dutifully mark the score on the poster boards, and stand at attention, so that the scores could be seen by the Reveille's, I, II, III, IV, at all times.

This story, laughable to the uninitiated, dim-witted and naïve to many sophisticates, represents an essential facet of a university, but is only available to students immersed in a campus culture. It sounds foolish to people who get their cognitive insight from MOOC's offered through MIT or Stanford or other Coursera universities. Interestingly, every university in the Coursera stable has pervasive traditions as difficult to understand as the Reveille line-of-sight quandary.

Traditions and spirit add not one whit of understanding to calculus, or differential equations, American history or world literature.

Tradition and spirit are difficult to calibrate but the value of both during the campus learning process, and thereafter, is priceless. All real universities have a measure of these twins of distinctiveness always clear to citizens, but murky to aliens.

I animatedly opined to a state senator in Illinois the value of universities a few years ago. This furniture entrepreneur/state senator felt that campuses would be a waste of time in the near future because free online information would be ubiquitous and cheap. He envisioned MOOC's.

I asked him where he went to college. He replied that he received a bachelor's degree from William and Mary. I asked him, "What was the best part of his educational experience?" He responded, "Living in the dorms." I said, "Steve, you just told me that universities were going to become useless because we can get all the information that we need online. Now you tell me that the dorm living experience was the most valuable part of the University? How can this be?"

He sheepishly confessed that the spirit and traditions of William and Mary had great value.

Imagine one million students, enrolled in MOOC's, in pairs of two standing before dead dogs holding up poster boards with football scores on them.

Try to imagine that and you will see why universities, especially those that tend to the educational and development needs of students outside the classroom, will continue to thrive in the future.

And, our universities that don't meet those needs will go by the wayside.