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Our Universities: Learning Not To Care

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Our Universities: Learning Not To Care

No matter how acute the acquired analytical ability, the craft in writing or the fluency in mathematics, if students leave universities with a sense that self is the only purpose of the university experience, the game is over. And it is lost.

“Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.”

Anthony J. D'Angelo

In a graduate seminar focused on aspirational leadership in higher education, I ask students to write papers weekly that address various issues of import related to universities. They seem to care, writing with passion and insight.

This past week, the outside of classroom learning at universities was the focus. To a person, the students seemed convinced that what's important at a university occurs in the formal structure of coursework combined with the experiences gained outside regimented study.

Most days, immersion makes the university look like a monastery. The experience outside of the formal teaching environment is commonly referred to as “The Other Education”: those extracurricular experiences that are planned for the students’ benefit or, in some cases “The Hidden Curriculum”: the messages sent and absorbed by the actions of people at the university in spite of any structured effort.

In either case it applies to the education of the whole student, and what he or she takes away from the university.

There are two cultures of caring: one positive, that encourages engagement, service learning and community; the other, negative, do-not-as-I-do culture, that may show students the dark side of caring, a form of self adulation.

Me, Me, Me.

This Machiavellian view allows that, in order to get what you want, any action is acceptable. The prize is worth any cost. It is about winning, not caring. And through it, we teach students not to care.

In campus cultures, varied engagements have value. Service learning -- assistance to people in the community -- is a positive extension of university life interlocked in a way that makes separation and compartmentalization of both experiences impossible. Blending experiences provides purpose that is greater than the sum of the parts.

There are aspects of university life that cause concern. Crime rates on many university campuses are increasing, according to a 2010 report released by the U.S. Department of Education. Yet, interestingly, service learning programs are also increasing, says the National Youth Leadership Council. Academic dishonesty is more prevalently practiced, known, excused, and tolerated. Over the past three years, more than 45,000 students at 80 institutions have been found guilty of “academic misconduct” according to Britain’s *Telegraph*.

Drug and alcohol abuse are on the increase in spite of health courses in high school, multi-million dollar ad campaigns, and the best efforts of campus counselors. The L.A. Times, in an August 22, 2012, piece reports, “Eighty-six percent of high school students say their classmates are smoking, drinking or using drugs during the school day, according to a national survey.” And they bring the patterns to campus.

Complex incongruencies foment a nagging and persistent fear: Amidst all of the positive curricular experiences and useful co-curricular engagements, we are teaching students not to care about important life decisions made daily.

Some would say, “Not my job.” Leading by example is the only job that matters.

Being reminded daily by the number of thoughtful students I encounter that they do care, does not offset the erosion of community, evidenced in cheating, stealing, assault, and substance abuse that undermine the foundation for productive civic life.

I would like to be more confident that progress is being made.

Academic leadership has an incumbent responsibility to care and to demonstrate care in action. When leadership demonstrates a self-serving attitude, students absorb and carry it away as surely as an understanding of history or math. Maybe more so. The most enduring lessons are not, fortunately and unfortunately, assigned in the classroom.

Intellectual development focused on graduation and retention rates and other superficial (these are not deep indices of anything valuable to students) institutional indicators of performance, may unintentionally soften the value of values... development of good citizenship, lived morality, and a sense of personal responsibility. These traits in students will most assuredly increase graduation and retention.

Our universities need to excel at challenging students intellectually, simultaneously encouraging them to compete fairly for the best that we have to offer. But if the cost is not caring, the price is too high, no matter how valuable the prize seems when won.

The fleeting benefits of learning not to care undermine the real power of education.