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Our Universities: Research Matters, Absolutely

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Our Universities: Research Matters, Absolutely

First in a Series on Research

Learning creates ideas grounded in the past but hopeful for the future. History is the basis for discovery, and it relentlessly repeats itself absent new ideas and insight: Forward focused investigation and research.

When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness.

Alexis de Tocqueville

In the rush to respond to predictions of the demise of American higher education, many suggest that addressing increased costs, lack of student ability to perform basic intellectual functions and an omnipresent push to graduate more students in shorter periods of time will solve the woes of contemporary higher education in the United States. All true in a measure.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, pondered the negative impact of the monarchy on many things, but paramount among them was the detrimental effect of diminished intellectual liberty on a free society. While nearly impossible to sum up his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, I will try: Liberty for free-thought fused to free-will is the foundation of a free society. Nothing else works.

Likewise, in universities without free expression fueling discovery, trade-schooling follows inexorably.

Research, scholarship and creative activities, fussily discussed and differentiated on university campuses for a multitude of reasons, are essentially the same thing: new ideas and fresh perspectives representing the exercise of free-thought and free-will. Developing new chemical compounds, explicating the value of history to society, or crafting a painting stimulating individuals to be situated in the world, differ only in degree and application. And most importantly, all demonstrate evolving thought that provides instructional value to citizen-students.

The best way for students to learn the transformative power of free-thought and free-inquiry is to work with an engaged mentor. Ideas, and the people that generate them, create an ever stronger society. Dogma of any kind is anti-democratic and works against the true purpose of the university.

Many, inside and outside the academy, disdain the growth of degree mills. Institutions that deliver techniques, abilities and even ideas don't certify a student "educated," but certify the student "exposed." Education cannot occur without exposure to be sure, but

short of enlightened action, training has occurred. Training has value but is not to be confused with education. This is not chicken and egg tautology, but the essence of a university.

When considering the establishment of a university in Vietnam, benefactors and investors saw the benefits of a western-style research university. A U.S. technology giant was planning an enterprise that would become the largest of its kind in the world. But corporate and government leadership was plagued by the nagging fear that existing national universities in Ho Chi Min City and Hanoi would not produce scientists and engineers to lead with their minds.

The perceived shortage of free-thinking, innovative individuals created a dramatic deficit for the future of Vietnam: Research universities are the antidote to uninspired training.

A good dose of de Tocqueville: The recognition that what was good for the individual, i.e. study and investigation that produces new ideas, was good for the social order. Likewise, any force, whether the monarchy or an overbearing single party governing order, was doomed to failure. Vietnam had long ago given up on universities and settled for trade schools adopting the colonizer's mindset. The impact went beyond the university as a basis for spawning new industry and infected the nature of the social order as well.

Intellectual vibrancy and social progress are welded together.

Research in universities is congenital. A good liberal arts college impacts people teaching a form of inquisitiveness that emulates the depth of what goes on at a research university. Likewise trade schools produce valuable results, but neither should be confused with a research university.

Universities cannot divorce themselves from workforce education and the preparation of skilled people to assume valuable roles in society. However if the research universities stop at employment expediency, they fall short of purpose.

Blind pragmatism creates a downward spiral evidenced in the slipping contribution of the European states to the global economy. Economically vibrant societies grow from new ideas, and good universities are hot houses that propagate them.

Social benefit is knitted into the cloth of the culture.

Research is not a luxury, but the foundation of intellectual life for faculty and students. If our universities respond only to pedestrian measures of progress -- how many, how fast, how much -- we might sacrifice the gold ring of new ideas, for the brass ring of measurable output, on the altar of ignorance.