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# Our Universities: Research Funding and Value

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# Our Universities: Research Funding and Value

*Sixth in a Series on Research*

Seeking to know is the foundation of education. How an engine works and how souls are nurtured are separated as ways of knowing only by the slightest degree. Both are vitally important to learning. We are losing their interdependence between red tape, balance sheets, and a trivialization of the importance of investigation in all forms, physics and poetry alike.

*Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.*

Zora Neale Hurston

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Escalating financial exigency increasingly encourages universities to turn to funded research as a durable source of capital. The pragmatic implications of this view are inarguable. However, the long-term outlook of research productivity is best vested in the value added to the learning experience. Cash flow is the result, not the cause.

The *Time* cover of January 10, 1964, depicts an image of R. Buckminster Fuller formed from dodecahedrons or another hyperventilated crystallization of geometric space. At that time, the Southern Illinois University Carbondale professor and Nobel Prize nominee studied -- with little outside support-- complex relationships of math, science, technology and life: what eventually became known as **Synergetics** or "systems thinking."

Fuller was driven by a desire to learn, not a desire to earn. These two aspirations are not mutually exclusive, but co-dependent in the long haul. When the desire to learn reaches its apex, dollars are not far behind: Vision is the glue that holds the two together. Ralph Waldo Emerson purportedly characterized it this way: "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door." Ideas create progress through value.

Fuller was gifted in making students think about what they were doing, why they were doing it, and the social benefit of applied ideas. He was, by anybody's definition, a scholar, but secured sparse support for his striving. The coin of Fuller's realm was intellectual acuity and concepts. So potent were his reflective excursions -- he could hold student attention for six hours -- they stretched the boundaries of their imaginations for a lifetime. And people got their monies worth.

Philosopher and political theorist Michael Oakeshott suggested, "There is an important difference between learning which is concerned with the degree of understanding

necessary to practice a skill, and learning which is expressly focused upon an enterprise of understanding and explaining.” Right he was. Is.

Fuller did not produce practical postulations that provided cash flow but rather a potentially charged desire to know. A culture of scholarship is hard to predicate and, for some, may be considered an accountant’s can of worms. Too bad, but that’s the way it is and why vision is essential, because, for a university, Fuller-like contributions are priceless in creating a campus’ intellectual climate.

Value is squeezed from fertile faculty and students’ minds the way juice is squeezed out of the pigs of an orange...one drop at a time. The bottom-line model of a university is powered by headcount and capitation, student enrollment, graduation, and retention rates -- business operating principles -- every one of which is important, but none of which necessarily leads to a better study environment for students. Likewise, a church inattentive to the pragmatics of management will go by the wayside, no matter how profound the theology.

Frequently, powerful ideas are gestated in pressure cookers of scholarship and creativity where people write, perform, paint, conceive and calculate with very little funding, yet the ideas produced are the substance of what sustains the breath of university life. Ideas create institutional “theology.”

Beverly Sills knew it when she said, "Art is the signature of civilization." True it is. She could easily have added science too. When properly propelled by power and purpose, high energy particle physics likewise affects and is affected by the milieu in which it is conceptualized.

The public -- those people who for their children or themselves decide to study at a university -- can be fooled but only for a season. Eventually universities without a meaningful intellectual environment will cease to attract good students, even, or especially, when degrees are sold like snake oil and peddled like popcorn under the Big Top by Madison Avenue mongers.

People are too smart.

Our universities’ value rests in the intellectual and moral environment created and sustained by ideas. Contributions to that mélange come from disciplines of the written word, performing and plastic arts, the study of antiquities, mathematics, languages, religion, cultures, societies, and some science for which little or no research funding is available, but value to society follows. And then the money flows.

The laws of the arithmetic of learning are at work. Hurston, Emerson, Oakeshott and Sills understood the concept.