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Our Universities: Human Touch

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Our Universities: Human Touch

Opportunities to increase the potency of a university are numerous. No single effort is more valuable than a concerned teacher working directly with a motivated student. Human touch is required to respond to the distinctive needs of each student.

There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people.

-- Thomas Jefferson

In the exercise of an annual habit, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities produced the top 10 higher education issues for 2013, under the banner of ***Policy Matters*** last week. And while the report did not say it, the relationship between teacher and student is the cure for most ills.

Boosting institutional performance to support performance-based funding is first on the list. Some measures floated to the top of the tally: student retention, degree completion, and enrollment – the last especially noteworthy as demographic forecasts predict a decreasing number of potential college students over the next two decades. Increasing retention, completion, and enrollees requires good teachers and advisors exercising caring concern for individual students.

Increased state operating support for higher education is the second most pressing issue. In spite of the wailing and gnashing of teeth, university presidents have little real impact on public funding beyond representing institutional need, which always exceeds available public resources. But, they can have tremendous impact on the quality of teaching, and that truly matters. When professors teach with passion and institutions are intolerant of incompetent teaching, good things happen. Leadership must recognize teaching excellence, and then legislators respond: They too were the victims of incompetence and the beneficiaries of enlightened instruction. At the Statehouse, lawmakers might be more responsive to the cries for help if good teaching seemed more important to institutional leadership. Without confidence from the Statehouse towards the schoolhouse, we are all in the outhouse. Excellence in both teaching and high human contact engagement is the elementary contribution to university effectiveness. And it is easily recognized and appreciated by those inside and outside of the academy.

Tuition prices and tuition policies shows up the third spot. Educational leadership must be concerned with cost efficiencies. The utilization of electronically supported learning opportunities, from i-Pads to i-clickers and i-wired courses, if correctly implemented, increases the impact and value of face-to-face human contact and leads to the highest value of human learning experience.

Student aid programs cashes in at number four. Through impassioned human contact, the probability of effective outcomes from student loans and grants are increased. Care needs to be exercised from both the lenders and borrowers perspectives. Good teachers can exercise care and thoughtful analysis of need, want, ability and outcome. An educator must eventually say, "This individual is a good bet." An algorithm or a clerk can't do that, valuable as both may be.

Online education places seventh on the list. It would be a good idea if every student was required to complete at least 10% of the required courses for a degree through free online educational opportunities. This would simultaneously reduce the cost of college by 10%. Combined online and onsite instruction provides the best of both worlds: high human contact and high efficiency -- each when needed -- support, not substitution.

College readiness (5), *immigration* (6) and *guns on campus* (8), made the list but are issues not particular to universities. Some educational leaders crave these conversations...they deflect attention from the difficult and challenging human contact issues that make education work, simultaneously providing the appearance of social concern. Appropriate focus on pedagogy is work of enlightened leadership.

Economic and workforce development is number nine. Human interactions between faculty members and students help people make vocational decisions, enabling graduates to be simultaneously productive citizens and breadwinners. These are personal matters that must be queried and addressed one at a time. Policies, while valuable, are not the key issue.

Number Ten is *consumer protection involving for-profit colleges*. It's about time. State boards, and those who appoint them, have peddled degrees regardless of quality, content, effectiveness, or faculty assessment of student fitness and probable contribution to the economy as an elixir for all that ails contemporary society. A growing tragedy marked by cheap degrees and the idea that everybody must have one, no matter the quality. Education turned into consumerism.

The human touch evident in good teaching in our universities is the key to effective performance. We all know invigorated teaching when we see it. Every student needs to be treated differently, read "unequally," so each may be treated fairly.

Human touch is the only way to accomplish such fair and potent treatment.