

Spring 6-4-2013

A Fearful Future?

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V. "A Fearful Future?" (Spring 2013).

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Our Universities: A Fearful Future?

The forces that appear to threaten universities provide the perfect opportunity for institutions to be able to do their job in a changing social milieu. What appears to contradict or undermine purpose is, in reality, a recovery of strength.

“Evil [a baseless challenge to what is right, my addition] has no substance of its own, but is only the defect, excess, perversion, or corruption of that which has substance.”

John Henry Cardinal Newman

Sometimes I'm an alarmist. I see changes in higher education that give me pause.

Alarming, student preparedness compared to a few generations ago is slipping. Students arrive on campus with low math, science and reading skills: a challenge perceived by many educators during most of the last half of the 20th century. To be sure, public expectations have increased as more families see universities as a means to economic security, regardless of student aptitude or demonstrated ability.

Another alarm rings: Students unsure of what to study but led to believe by pop culture, parents, and press that studying anything at a university has value. This was probably true 100 years ago when a smaller portion of the population attended college and there were fewer “junk” degree options. It is increasingly less true and many more graduates in traditional disciplines from anthropology to zoology, studied without passion or purpose, yield low value educational experiences.

A third alarm resonates: Brick and mortar universities will become dinosaurs as they are replaced by online and Massively Open Online Courses (MOOC's), for cheapness, accessibility, opportunities for self-paced learning, and omnipresent availability in a virtual classroom at a virtual university.

The clanging fourth alarm: A university should be a means of providing employment. This is not to demean the value of a job at graduation. Effective education should create a desire for life-long learning in students because learning creates ability and ability creates employment opportunity. Certificates don't do that. Enlightened capability does and it is the pinnacle of education.

These four alarms should not lessen the value universities bring to individual and society, but make us examine how contemporary universities may best serve and support a free and forward-looking society.

Rather than decry the implications of poor preparation of students, universities must find ways to create an enriched learning environment that challenges students in response to changing attitudes, aptitudes and aspirations.

Well directed focus on career choice creates interest and motivation. How many times have we heard college graduates say, "The first two years of school were not much fun for me, but in the core of my career interests in the last two, my attention and performance increased." This is not mindless careerism, but interest driven achievement.

Online learning, when correctly exploited, creates the means for students to improve exposure and ability.

With this mindset, it is possible to confront the three alarms of preparation, focus, and access, through the fourth alarm: the muscle and liberation of the demonstrated love of learning.

Threats squarely addressed become energizing agents. Threat *"has no substance of its own,"* except what we give it.

Good universities function by focusing on the relationship between teacher and student, each committed to learning. No placebo works. These four alarms should create a faculty guided renaissance in how our universities serve students and society. Enlightened leadership and impassioned faculty seize imagined threats as empowering refreshments.

Guarantees of success for prepared students, assurances of lifetime employment, the replacement of the campus with internet addresses, and the myth that when the degree is complete so is learning are evaporating one by one.

Perspective, purpose and persistence fuel excellence. Fear leads to turf protection, the antithesis of education.