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Our Universities: Borders of the Mind

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Borders of the Mind

The beauty of American higher education is the coupling of thought and action: Thinking people putting ideas to work make a university strong. It's the foundation of a free society to boot. But is it a disappearing reality?

“You see, idealism detached from action is just a dream. But idealism allied with pragmatism, with rolling up your sleeves and making the world bend a bit, is very exciting. It's very real. It's very strong.”

Bono

Hank Williams twanged Clarence Williams' (no kin) ballad *“My Bucket's got A Hole in It”* in 1949. We have two holes in our higher education bucket in 2013 and they need plugging.

Brain drain, not a flush but a slow leak, of students into Canada to places like McGill University in Montréal is gaining momentum. Speculation on causes of the migration proliferates. Six percent of the McGill's students are U.S. citizens, and the number is growing. In an April 24th **NBC** report, Rehema Ellis and Jeff Black argue the primary reason for students departing the U.S. for Canada is cost.

McGill University is an excellent institution. Comparison with U.S. institutions is difficult. This much is clear: costs are 25 cents on the dollar. The decisions are value judgments: Is a domestic degree worth four times what you would pay for its Canadian counterpart? It's a family decision.

The growing number of students in default on college loans, north of 15%, increasingly pinpoints cost as the central variable in the education equation. The days of the idea that, “No matter what it costs it's worth it.” are numbered. Or evaporated, like a few of the 5,439 cubic miles of water in the Great Lakes, currently at their lowest level since 1918, according to a National Geographic study.

I know it's a trickle, a few vapors. And nobody sees it happen. But it does.

The number of students studying at Canadian institutions has increased by 50% over the last decade. The deep discounts compared to competitors south of the 49th parallel are magnetic: Tens of thousands of dollars per year is real money to real people.

Our universities are built on the Western European model, reinvented and I believe perfected, 150 years ago, ignited by U.S. ingenuity driven by pragmatism at the pinnacle of the Industrial Revolution.

Our northern neighbors use a similar model. Merit-based admission, test scores, class rank, grades, good faculty and facilities as well as reasonable approaches to “other-than-academic” amenities are the benchmarks.

Thoughtful American students are being siphoned off.

The open intellectual market should be the stone on which U.S. institutions whet their edge to meet the demands and needs of students, culture, and country, by helping people generate razor sharp insight and exceptional intellectual capability.

A second leaking of intellect is reported in a July 16, ***New York Times*** column. Richard Perez-Pena reveals the increasingly common occurrence of cyber attacks at U.S. universities. With greater frequency, intellectual property departs our borders over the Internet via stolen patents. Citizens of nations less concerned about the value of intellectual property — knowledge and insight expressed in action — than we have historically been in America wantonly steal what’s not theirs.

This electronic larceny is directed towards the backbone of our republic — ideas — the cold steel of opportunity fired by opportunity.

These two leaks, one over the lakes, the other over the network, yield a costly impact on American economic vitality.

The trickle is starting. A torrent may follow.

American pride’s seed is the “idea.” We develop the patents for the VCR or the microwave and, if Japan, Taiwan, Korea, or Vietnam can produce the device at a lower cost, the U.S. still benefits... as long as our nation values the intellect and the property produced by it. When we allow either to leave, we lose.

Our universities face significant challenges. We better get smart about controlling costs and quality. Likewise, the intellectual kettles in the kitchens of our nation should be carefully tended. The leaking bucket undermines American contributions to the democracy of ideas.

The nurture and protection of our insight and wisdom in every manifestation create a stronger nation and a better world.