

Fall 12-16-2013

Our Universities: Educating a Workforce

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V. "Our Universities: Educating a Workforce." (Fall 2013).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our Universities: Educating a Workforce

In the best cases, technical education is not just training. In the worst cases, training in literature, history, and mathematics is not always education. Oversimplifications do injustice to both pursuits.

“If you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don’t bother trying to teach them. Instead give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking.”

R. Buckminster Fuller

California community colleges are pressing to offer four-year degrees. According to a *CCnewsnow.com* story, Brice Harris, Chancellor of the system’s 112 community colleges in California, assembled a group to study the viability of four-year degrees at the two-year schools in fields with high workforce demands.

The group argues this way: ***The California Master Plan for Higher Education***, launched in 1960, was based in part on the premise that jobs and the economy of California are the result of first-rate, post-secondary education. Baccalaureate workforce education is not being fully addressed by the four-year institutions in California. The community colleges want to fill the void and offer baccalaureate degrees in select fields. San Diego Community College Chancellor, Constance Carroll and the committee say workforce training is an important part of higher education’s mission and community colleges are ready and willing to do it. Universities seem unready and/or unwilling.

Why do some senior institutions shy away from workforce preparation?

Over a century ago, Christopher C. Langdell had to argue stridently as Dean of Harvard Law School that professional education was important and had a place at the university. His impact on American education changed the nature of modern university’s according to Bruce A. Kimball in ***The Inception of Modern Professional Education***. Langdell pioneered concepts like meritocracy, measuring student performance, and competitive admission. He believed universities should be rigorous. Nobody — faculty, students, administrators, or alumni — liked his ideas. These collected naysayers thought Langdell’s views would change the university. They were right.

Some fear an emphasis on skills-based education, with measurable results, is training rather than education and not the purpose of the university. But Langdell’s thinking

paralleled the late 19th century land-grant university phenomenon. Both changed universities into places where performance mattered and knowledge was applied to solve problems. Both encouraged a form of pragmatism.

Universities have the responsibility to prepare educated and trained graduates in disciplines where a two-year degree is insufficient. Knife edge balance of seemingly competing forces creates an educational experience that provides critical thinking while simultaneously preparing graduates for high-demand jobs. Nursing and many health related disciplines, technically demanding occupations such as aviation, public safety, information systems, and other applied arts, sciences and technologies that have an indelible impact on each of us every day are examples.

In ***Mutual Subversion: A Short History of the Liberal and the Professional in American Higher Education***, David F. Labaree points out, “... over the years professional education has gradually subverted liberal education. The counterpoint is that, over the same period of time, liberal education has gradually subverted professional education.”

On the one hand, concerns about turning the university into a trade school are appropriately voiced by academics who value a strong critical mind with the opportunity for diverse applications of knowledge. On the other hand, faculty in workforce preparation areas, in fields where legitimate baccalaureate studies are required, constantly vie for their place at the academic table. They are frequently seen as second class university citizens by being too narrowly focused.

The disciplines of applied sciences and arts and workforce education have a legitimate place in university life and a role in economic development. It is hard to imagine Harvard, as the 19th century turned into the 20th, without Christopher Langdell’s calls for enhanced professional education. Likewise it’s hard to imagine the U.S. agricultural and machine-based economy without the applied education provided by the land-grant institutions.

If our universities neglect the concept of workforce preparation and specialized technical skill as necessary and worthy pursuits for universities important possibilities go begging.