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Profit, Productivity, and Honors

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An Associated Press story of December 9, 2013, tells the tale of two younger members of the U.S. Senate, Chris Murphy and Brian Schatz, who are sponsoring legislation “aimed at lowering college costs by withholding federal funds from schools that fail to meet new national affordability and quality standards”; Senator Murphy is cited as saying, “College administrators need to wake up every morning thinking about how they can make school cheaper, and that is not happening today” (Collins). (In an amusing but disconcerting coincidence, the same edition of my newspaper reported that the average annual cost per student at our state’s flagship university was about \$33,000 while the average annual cost for a football player was about \$144,000.) I believe that too many college administrators (and senators) are already thinking about how to cheapen the college experience. Our colleges, universities, honors programs, and the nation would be much better served if we all turned our attention not to cutting costs but to increasing quality. Let’s wake up every morning thinking about how to make our schools *better*.

Gary Bell’s timely piece on the dangers and lures of for-profit honors education is, as one would expect given its authorship, spot-on. I want to take advantage of the impunity of retirement status to take the argument one step further and offer the heretical suggestion that we have, all of us, allowed the discussion to be turned in the wrong direction.

In an ominously steady progression over the past decades, education in general, higher education in particular, and even honors education have increasingly been contextualized in the realm of the marketplace. We examine cost/benefit analyses of colleges and universities; we compare institutions in terms of their price to consumers (students and their families); we cite gainful employment statistics of graduates; we lament tuition shortfalls; we have certainly turned college presidents, who a century ago were supposed to be intellectual and ethical leaders, into salespeople. Colleges and universities hire consultants to assist them in “branding.” My alma mater, with fewer than fifteen hundred students, has an executive position entitled “Chief Investment Officer”; that’s investment in the stock market, not investment in learning.

After a couple of decades as a college president, I understand that it is necessary for our institutions to have the fiscal resources necessary to do our business: pay our faculty and staff, maintain our facilities, offer financial aid

to our students, and the like. What I refuse to accept is that we are somehow just like other institutions operating in a competitive free-market economy. I reject, for example, the too-frequent injunctions from some in the corporate world that colleges and universities “just need to be more like businesses.” Since 2008, with businesses collapsing left and right, those injunctions seem even more hollow than ever.

A former professional wrestler who was governor of my state while I was chancellor of a public liberal arts university lamented that education funding was like a bottomless pit. Quietly, I agreed with Gov. Ventura: no matter how much money we spend on education, there is always going to be somewhere we could spend more, with positive results. Learning does not need to be expensive, but it is an investment that can never be overfunded.

One particularly virulent lure, which has unfortunately ensnared many of our institutions and those who guide them, is the temptation to measure “productivity.” Obviously, colleges need to produce something, but it is far too easy to measure the production of things which are, actually, only tangential to our core mission.

Here, for example, is a definition of higher education “productivity” offered by one international consulting firm:

. . . colleges would simultaneously have to attract additional students, increase the proportion of them who complete a degree, and keep a tight lid on costs. Gaming the target by lowering the quality of the education or granting access only to the best-prepared students obviously wouldn’t count. Not surprisingly, many people within and beyond higher education say that colleges can’t possibly do all these things at once.

But McKinsey research suggests that many already are, using tactics others could emulate. In fact, the potential to increase productivity across the varied spectrum of US higher education appears to be so great that, with the right policy support, one million more graduates a year by 2020, at today’s spending levels, begins to look eminently feasible. . . . How a college manages its resources shows up in its cost per degree, found by dividing the institution’s total annual costs by the number of degrees awarded. (Cota)

Despite the disclaimer that “lowering the quality of education . . . wouldn’t count,” productivity given this metric is a simple arithmetic issue: how many college degrees can be produced at “x” cost? If University A can produce ten BA degrees for a million dollars and College B can produce twenty, B is twice as productive as A.

A somewhat more sophisticated, but equally pernicious, variant of this measure is the “cost per credit hour” calculation: how much it costs an institution to produce each academic credit hour granted to students. This measure, alas, is often used within institutions to assess the “productivity” of academic departments or programs against each other. If the music or physics department produces a student credit hour for \$1,000 while the English department costs \$500 per credit, then music or physics is half as “productive” as English and thus potentially expendable.

By these measures, honors programs and colleges are often branded as relatively unproductive, costing more to generate a degree or credit hour than outside honors. If an honors professor making \$75,000 per year teaches fifteen students in a four-credit-hour course and another at the same salary level teaches forty-five, then that professor is less “productive,” and, if two of these professors are team-teaching those fifteen students, they are still less “productive.” However, if we define “productive” in the correct way, the team-taught honors seminar may well emerge the productivity winner. The question, of course, is what we are supposed to produce, and the answer is neither college degrees nor credit hours. The purpose of colleges and universities, of honors programs and honors colleges, is to produce wisdom.

All that remains is to cut the Gordian knot of a couple of thousand years of philosophical speculation and define, for once and for all, “wisdom.” I am reminded of a tale from my religious tradition of Rabbi Hillel. A non-Jew came to the Rabbi and proclaimed himself ready to convert to Judaism if Hillel could tell him the essence of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) while he stood on one foot. (Hillel gave it a good effort: he responded “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”) I am no Hillel, for sure; I can’t define “wisdom” in a paragraph or two. The best I can say is that “wisdom” means something like a combination of knowledge with the understanding that comes from experience, ethical reflection, and a broad grasp of the relationships of many things to each other.

Surely, our evolving honors pedagogy, expensive as it is, cultivates such a cluster of characteristics, as the following examples illustrate:

- Honors courses and co-curricular options often offer undergraduates types of experiential learning opportunities qualitatively different from non-honors work. Honors has increasingly stressed study abroad, service learning, volunteerism, and site-based learning. All of these possibilities invite bright students to triangulate on their own culture and prior experience and to understand both themselves and others more deeply.

PROFIT, PRODUCTIVITY, AND HONORS

- Honors curricula, by often challenging students to encounter the most profound works of literature, ethics, history, philosophy, and science—especially in participatory seminar settings—invite reflection on the most important eschatological questions we humans face: What is the meaning and purpose of life, of my life? If we must die, how should we live? What is our duty to our fellow humans? Is virtue or virtuous action defined by results or intentions? Do I believe in some power beyond the human, and if so, what is my relationship to it? If not, where do I look for the source and template for ethical judgments? A small group of students, led by a skilled Socratic professor, discovering and probing such questions in *Hamlet* or in the works of Darwin or Marx, can make progress in travelling down the often confusing pathway to enlightenment.
- Interdisciplinary and/or team-taught courses, often found only in honors at many institutions, are an especially rich mechanism for helping students to cultivate an understanding of the relationships between things. What are the similarities between the languages of mathematics and of poetry? What might the study of cosmology in physics teach us about theology? How might a course in the history of China enlighten us in the area of contemporary global economic development?

In terms of dollar cost per credit hour, experiential learning, challenging seminars, and interdisciplinary courses are almost always going to be expensive, but—to paraphrase, of all things, an advertisement for a credit card—I know that, in producing wisdom in young women and men, they are priceless.

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