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THE UNIVERSITY IN DIGITAL FLUX: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROB SALKOWITZ

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By now, many of us in higher education can recite the list of issues and problems that our profession faces as easily as singing the ABC's ditty we learned in Kindergarten: (a) the fear of cuts in funding, (b) the need for curriculum change, (c) the impact of technology, (d) the influence of global markets and cultures, and (e) the need to understand the Net Generation—and the madness of texting. Perhaps, not since the Great Depression do we understand the true need to do more with less. Yet the ability to tackle these challenges appears hopeless, especially at state comprehensive universities where faculty members teach four-four and five-five teaching loads. How can we do more—and get anything done, at all? What kinds of options do we have? Where should we go from here? What should we do in and out of the classroom? Is there any hope?

I found answers to these problems in a book that is probably not on any academic's reading list: *Young World Rising: How Youth, Technology, and Entrepreneurship Are Changing the World from the Bottom Up* (Wiley, 2010) by Rob Salkowitz. A successful young entrepreneur himself, Rob Salkowitz helped launch seven businesses during the 1990s and is a founding partner and Director of Strategy and Content Development of MediaPlant, a digital communications consulting firm. He has also written *Generation Blend: Managing Across the Technology Age Gape* (Wiley, 2008), focusing on the differences between the pre- and post-digital generations in the workplace, and *Listening to the Future: Why It's Everybody's Business with Daniel Rasmus* (Wiley, 2009). Salkowitz earned a BA in international relations from Columbia University.

Some readers—especially academics who practice daily in the art of skepticism—might find Salkowitz's message too hopeful. Even Salkowitz admits early in his book that he might seem to be too optimistic, but he invites readers to see the promise for a prosperous future based on the evidence of successful stories from around the world. His message is simple: Globally, young people with remarkable access to networks and information technology are in the position to change the knowledge economy from the bottom up. Electrified with innovative ideas, enticing ways to engage customers, remarkable solutions to age-old problems, and effective organizational models, Young World businesses are changing the future. If these global, young, tech-savvy entrepreneurs with no start-up money can accomplish astounding things, can't we?

While reading *Young World Rising*, I made immediate connections to the Red Balloon Project. Under the direction of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Red Balloon Project lists the following as forces profoundly challenging public higher education: declining funding, rising academic expectations, rapidly developing technology, and internationalization. Because Salkowitz's book addresses all four of these challenges and offers not only solutions to them but hope for a prosperous future through the knowledge economy, he proved to be an ideal speaker for FHSU's Red Balloon Project Speaker Series. His luncheon presentation, "How Young Entrepreneurs are Changing Global Business and What it Means for Educators," addressed the following:

The spread of digital technology to young countries is driving a new style of entrepreneurship, creating demand for new skills and new approaches. Salkowitz provides examples of how successful entrepreneurs elsewhere in the world reinvest in training and education because the established systems are not working for them. The take-away is that educators need to think about ways to bring out the latent talent and creativity of budding entrepreneurs and prepare other students for the different skills needed in a more entrepreneurial-driven economy. This need might mean greater public-private and transnational dialogues around education.

On the day of Salkowitz's visit, he gave a student presentation—where thirty additional seats were needed to accommodate the unexpected numbers, a luncheon presentation, and a faculty workshop. Faculty members and students came away rethinking the purpose of higher education, addressing the need to make changes to the curriculum, and re-conceptualizing higher education within the scope of the knowledge economy. The following interview occurred through e-mail exchange with Eric Leuschner and Dan Kulmala after Rob Salkowitz's visit.

Kulmala: Your book *Young World Rising* is attracting continued interest by educators. Has this interest surprised you? And if it has, why? Based on your experience, why has higher education gravitated toward your ideas in your book?

Salkowitz: I think educators are gravitating to these ideas for the same reason that I did: desperation! We're in an environment where we face huge, daunting global problems and diminishing prospects for solving them through the traditional methods of collective action. Entrepreneurship offers the hope of progress (social, material, economic) without reliance on the failed institutions of government, big business, or social consensus. It's also a rare point of agreement across the ideological spectrum; even social conservatives are willing to tolerate social change

and mobility driven by market forces, and even hard leftists concede that innovators deserve to benefit from the fruits of their ingenuity. In an educational context, entrepreneurship promotes the development of useful skills combined with strategic thinking. Both the rigor and the relevance of entrepreneurial approaches are beyond question. Where else in academia can you check off all of those boxes? Finally, public commitment to educational resources is at a low; the idea of entrepreneurial solutions for the educational institutions themselves is probably appealing to administrators in a practical sense.

Kulmala: To what extent would you say that learning today needs to be global learning? Or should we look at this question in another way: Is all learning global learning, today?

Salkowitz: That's a good way of saying it: all learning is global learning today. There are lots of great examples from current events to help teach all kinds of skills and ideas, and with the ubiquity of information today, it's easy for students to find interesting stories from all over the world as part of their assignments.

Leuschner: One of the things that struck me in your examples was the seeming lack of a profit motive among young entrepreneurs. As you describe it, the business model element exists, but the social need seems to override it. With the example of the IRIS [a computer interface for the blind developed by undergraduate students at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira in Colombia], you point out that they could have sold it to a major company who would have produced it as a too-expensive product, but they did it themselves and made an affordable product that could be distributed to poorer areas of Colombia. Could you comment further on the "profit motivation" of the millennial generation? How does this, for instance, play into the Occupy Wall Street movement?

Salkowitz: I'd characterize the Millennial approach to entrepreneurship as a blend between social and commercial motivations. Nearly all the examples I wrote about in *Young World Rising* are for-profit businesses that see the creation of social value as the best path to prosperity. They also recognize the need for a sustainable, market-based revenue model to keep their organizations afloat without dependence on donors, governments, or large corporate sponsor/partners. To the extent that OWS is a Millennial phenomenon, I think it reflects the frustrations of being dependent on big, unaccountable entities (e.g. banks) for economic progress, in addition to an objection to excessive profit-taking in the face of social need.

Leuschner: Many of your examples are tech-based and the young entrepreneurs who have the idea usually need a team of more credentialed experts (PhDs for instance) to put the idea into action. But it is the young entrepreneur who sees the big picture, as it were. Do you see this also working with the hard sciences? Do you see the young entrepreneur model working at the National Institute of Health for instance?

Salkowitz: I focus on the IT sector because there are fewer dependencies on capital and infrastructure. That's part of why the current era is so different: young people can build technology on platforms that others have already invested billions in building. IT companies sometimes give the service or the training for free just to get people using their technology, and this creates a race to expand access to very powerful systems without the traditional barriers. That's unprecedented, and its impacts are profound. In other areas of hard science, healthcare, and industry, the rules haven't changed: you still need institutional support, capital, infrastructure, hard-won skills and experience, etc. There's still a good story around entrepreneurship in these areas, but it's not as new, different and interesting as what's going on in IT.

Kulmala: Is part of the attraction to your ideas connected to the concept of the knowledge economy? You list the following industries in connection to the knowledge economy: "biotechnology, nanotechnology, robotics, alternative energy, materials science, and others as-yet undiscovered" (11). Is it possible that universities need to be thinking in an entrepreneurial manner as participants in the knowledge economy? If so, how might they do so?

Salkowitz: There are several appealing aspects of the knowledge economy. First, as just noted, you can create knowledge-based businesses with less infrastructure and less capital: the only capital you need is between your ears. Second, the knowledge economy is based on abundance rather than scarcity: digital information, once created, can be spread and distributed at zero marginal cost. The potential for creating value through knowledge is unbounded by supply chains, manufacturing costs, or any of the ordinary drags on economic velocity. It does not depend on owning land or minerals, and depends on high-wage rather than low-wage labor to produce. Finally, it is fundamentally egalitarian. You don't need to be wealthy or well-connected to start a knowledge-economy business—just look at many of the examples in my book who come from very resource-poor backgrounds.

For these reasons, all universities and institutions devoted to the

liberal arts have been implicitly contributing to the knowledge economy for centuries; their organizational and ideological orientations are already aligned to these values and ideas. Every university already sells knowledge as its primary offering; research universities have been monetizing their IP in the form of patents; many benefit from the largesse of alumni who go on to found successful businesses based on the knowledge, connections and resources they got at college. There are probably other ways they could monetize their contributions to the knowledge economy, but they also have a larger mission and a set of values that is bigger than commercial considerations.

Leuschner: You make the important qualification that only 5% of the population falls into the “young entrepreneur” category and only 5% of those are successful. Part of the implication of those statistics is that we (as educators) need to address how the rest of us can best support and work with the ideas. How can higher education address both populations—encourage innovation, vision, entrepreneurship, etc., but also develop skills of how to recognize ideas and work with ideas?

Salkowitz: Every time people ask me about educating entrepreneurs, I try to steer the conversation toward “preparing students for an entrepreneurial economy,” because I think that’s more practical and achievable. Real impact-entrepreneurs are few and far between, but the organizations they create need people with different skills than your ordinary big business/government agency/academic institution, and those are where the most rewarding new job opportunities are likely to be. Entrepreneurial entities need adaptive generalists who can learn fast, not specialists trained into rigidly-defined disciplines or job roles. They need people who can identify problems and take initiative. They need people who can find and use information, knowing what to trust even in the absence of gatekeepers. Whenever I talk to big entrepreneurial companies overseas, they complain that their higher-ed institutions are not giving them graduates with these kinds of skills.

Leuschner: In some of your examples (the Colombian one for example again), you note that the students see a societal problem and come up with a solution. You also note, however, that American students are often insulated (American society is even insulated it seems). Could you comment further on the effect of that on American higher education? How do we (as educators) get students to look outside themselves, look outside the classroom to see their place in solving needs of society?

Salkowitz: They say necessity is the mother of invention; here,

we've needed less at the basic level, so our innovations tend to be more specialized. That does not mean there are no problems to solve. I've judged several student business plan contests here in the US and have seen a lot of great ideas around energy conservation, green technology, water reuse, urban living, transportation and healthcare. In my experience, young people are very aware of these problems, especially at the global level, but the problems are so big that they are not sure how to address them. Educators can help by showing students ways to understand the inter-relationship of systems and identify weak points where small innovations can make a big difference. This is actually a critical-thinking skill, not an engineering skill. If they know what to look for and how to budget their efforts to make the greatest difference, they will find ways to innovate on the issues that matter to them.

Kulmala: What would you suggest that educators in Higher Education do in and out of the classroom to get students thinking in an entrepreneurial manner?

Salkowitz: Practical assignments (identify a problem, create solution) tend to bring out the entrepreneurial impulse. Also analysis that looks at costs and benefits on a systems level. Contests and team events that recognize innovation are also great motivators for Millennials who thrive on feedback for their achievements.

Leuschner: A stereotype of the "young genius" (a Mark Zuckerman, for example) is that they have an issue with communication or interpersonal skills. Whether or not this stereotype is true or partially true, do you see this as a missing component of higher education?

Salkowitz: The stereotypical "lone genius" entrepreneur is *sui generis* and outside the educational conversation. You can't make more of them with a better approach, and you can't change the ones that come along naturally. The more common type of 21st-century entrepreneur definitely needs communication skills, especially in terms of team coordination, leadership, empathy, and written expression, as all of those things will contribute to their success. Those skills are also fundamental to young people who want to participate in entrepreneurial businesses without necessarily being the founder/innovator, or for people trying to pursue their ambitions in creative, public service, educational, or other fields of endeavor.

Leuschner: As a speculative question, you highlight the millennial generation in your work, but we're now seeing early examples of

“generation Z” (or “digital natives”) entering higher education. Do you see an important shift in this new generation? Or do you think the generational model is no longer relevant?

Salkowitz: My reading of the generational model is that the succeeding generation represents a reaction to, not an extension of, the currently-ascendant generation. Just think back to the Boomer-GenX transition, and how different the class of 1987 was from the class of 1982. At the moment, we are at “Millennial high-tide,” where just about every young person from 10-30 is part of the Millennial generation, so we won’t really start to see a shift for another 8-10 years, but I’m betting that the post-Millennials will not be as enamored with technology, multitasking, collaboration, self-promotion and the other traits we identify with kids today—and the differences will really start to emerge when Millennial-generation teachers are the ones trying to deal with classrooms full of Post-Mils. I tend to believe Post-Mils will be more linear, less earnest, more literate and literary (and into the arts in general), more pragmatic in their quest for social justice, and later bloomers than Millennials, but time will tell.