The Role of Higher Education in America: A Spa or a Smörgåsbord?

Amany Saleh
Marcia Lamkin
David Cox

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American higher education has a long and rich tradition of seeking higher moral and civic purposes in its endeavors. . . [C]ampuses have been the sites of debate on the critical issues of the day and faculty have sought to provide students with tools for rigorous analysis, critical reflection . . . . Now more than ever, higher education is challenged to educate the leaders of tomorrow and to connect those future leaders with the world of today. (Hollander 1999, v).

Since the GI Bill changed the nature of college education after World War II, programs of higher education have continued to evolve toward the service organizations that we enjoy today. Universities, once the purview of the well-to-do and privileged, opened their doors to thousands of first-generation students – students who were the first in their families to study past the level of public school – and thousands more who could never have afforded to attend a university program (Merrow 2005).

As laws changed in response to the demand of a changing populace, universities opened their doors to minority, immigrant, and international students and began to add the services necessary for those students to complete their studies and to graduate. A broad network of community or junior colleges developed, offering programs of study in professional and technical fields (Astin 1999).

Malveaux noted the change in the role held by higher education in his statement, “Once upon a time, higher education was seen as a public good that brought value to our society. Now, higher education is perceived as a personal investment in which the public has limited interest” (2003, 2). Society as a whole, parents, and students expect a return on their investment in higher education that is quantifiable, standard, and measured in terms of values which are incongruent with those originally envisioned for such institutions. Hersh stated that, “education is not business and you cannot measure it in the same sense you [would] measure a product” (Merrow 2005). Boyer suggested six principles for building learning communities that should be held by higher education institutions:

1. A college is an educationally purposefully community, a place where the faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus.

2. A college is an open community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.

3. A college is a just community, a place where the sacredness of the person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued.

4. A college is a disciplined community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.

5. A college is a caring community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.

6. A college is a celebrative community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and
where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1990, 7).

The authors of this paper argue that these principles are being compromised under the guise of providing needed services for local citizens. The academic community would not debate that the university plays a service role, but the nature of that service has not been clearly defined. The authors contend that “the student as a customer” notion is not compatible with the goals and purposes of academe. In the experience of these authors, many students view the university as a smörgåsbord, a feast of coursework to which they can come, freely choose classes, demand the attention of professors, and expect to succeed with no more effort than they expended at their public schools. Some university students and administrators view higher education as an elite restaurant at which the faculty must wait on students, serve the best of everything without regard to cost or effort, and cater to their every wish.

We see our “service” in a very different way. We see higher education as an elite spa to which students come for the specific expertise of the faculty and for a specific result. Like the spa to which customers come in order to lose weight, improve nutrition, and exercise, students need to augment and enhance their skills and knowledge in fields such as mathematics, history, technology, and biology. Like the spa at which consultants prescribe every mouthful that their customers eat, instruct and remind customers about the value of food and exercise, and oversee a required program of appropriate exercise, students enroll at the university to receive instruction, improve self-discipline, gain skills toward future employment, and be assessed toward their mastery of skills and knowledge.

Financial Concerns

However, in our current times, with the decline in federal and state funding and the increased competition for students’ enrollment, many universities are abdicating this role and moving towards the open-buffet model. Schnider (2004) argued that universities have abandoned their intellectual, social, and leadership responsibilities to the community. Farquhar (2003) contended that universities in the 20th century had traditionally sought the role of serving the public interest, a role that, in more recent years, had become counterproductive. She pointed out that financial cutbacks had led to reduction of “human resources, facility maintenance, equipment modernization, library acquisition, basic research, administrative systems” (3); all these cutbacks have led to continuous decline of the universities’ ability to serve their role in the community. University systems have moved to the fast-turnover profit of the buffet system rather than maintain the expert and demanding higher education spa.

Farquhar further (2003) stated that, “in our efforts to be responsive by reducing costs and placing priority on certain offerings that are least expensive and/or in greatest demand by economic [planners, the result...] can be the neglect of those fields of learning which are most crucial to the kind of high-quality liberal education that is best for the public interest” (4).

In universities’ eagerness to adhere to a corporate management model and a market economy, universities compete for funding, scholarships, and resources which conflict with collaborative intellectual and academic values that they should uphold to serve the community (Farquhar, 2003). That is, universities clamor at their own open buffet rather than focus on learning issues. Professors compete within colleges and departments for funding to support their research and travel. Such competition reduces the chances for collegial efforts that would support students’ learning and the
common good. “[H]igher education’s preoccupation at the institutional level with resources acquisition and reputational enhancement make it difficult to appreciate the critical importance of effectively educating underprepared students in general” (Astin 1999, 38).

Quality of Students

Through the course of the past 50 years of change in higher education, the role of academe has shifted from elite dispenser of ultimate knowledge to service organization, providing programs based on customer demand and catering widely to an under-prepared student body. Universities in the public domain enroll students under “open admissions” policies: if the student can pay the bill for the first semester, then the student can attend; and the university struggles to create the services necessary for student retention and success. For example, a large number of universities report that over 50 percent of first year students are enrolled in remediation classes in English and mathematics. These remediation efforts reportedly cost the public in excess of 59 million dollars a year (Hodges 2005). To extend our metaphor, participation in university study no longer enjoys the limits imposed by natural ability or financial stability: anyone may fill his academic belly at this smörgåsbord.

Sixty-eight percent of college students work 15 hours a week; 20 percent are full time students and hold full time jobs. Over 50 percent of students leave college without graduation and with large debts. One in four students does not make it to his/her sophomore year (Merrow 2005). Many college freshmen leave college after a year of remediation courses with minimal college credit, a large debt, and a great sense of despair.

Such reported statistics might give the false impression that college classes have high expectations that students are failing to meet, but this is not the case according to the literature. Brain Strow, an Assistant Professor of economics at Western Kentucky University, and Paula Kruzer, a full Professor of Political Science at the University of Arizona, both agree that students today come to class not willing to discuss issues, and lack intellectual drive to analyze and learn in depth the materials covered in class (Merrow 2005). Kruzer commented that college students are not “embarrassed” to admit that they don’t read the course materials, never seek her help during office hours, and don’t care to speak or discuss the issues in class. As a result, she posits that she should not make extra effort to engage these students (Merrow 2005). George Foldesy, a Professor of Education Law, contends that education is the only commodity for which people are willing to pay without getting anything in return (Personal Communication 2006).

Grade inflation at all levels of education is becoming a problem that extends to higher education. Fifty to sixty percent of college students are awarded a “B” or better (Merrow 2005). The “Gentleman’s C” is now awarded to students who should fail classes, but pass because college instructors are reluctant to fail students when their jobs are predicated on students’ retention. “You will get funded based on the number of students you enroll, retain, and graduate. If you want to get paid, you will retain the students” commented Gray Ransdell, Western Kentucky University President, about professors’ concerns of being pressured to retain students despite their lack of skills (Merrow 2005).

Benton (2006) asserted that college professors require far fewer assignments and inflate the grades in order to reduce their work load. “Higher grades require less written justification, result in fewer student complaints, and require no follow-up advising,” he wrote (¶ 9).
The students find that, in highly-populated college classes, lack of personal contact and boring lectures drive them away or decrease their motivation to persevere in college. Students complain that they are not challenged and cared for by university faculty and staff. Students dislike the fact that professors are more interested in research than in teaching. As a result, George Kuh stated that we have “a great number of students sleep walking through college” (Merrow 2005).

**Technology**

Another issue that faces higher education institutes is rapid technological advances, the ways that they can be utilized to compete in this market economy, and the effects that they have on the collegiate experience. The dramatic rise of students’ demands for online delivery of college classes can prove detrimental to the role of higher education institutions. Students expect an extension of the open buffet environment into the world of online education. Fraquhar (2003) stated that application of such technology “[c]an become instrumental means that subvert academic ends, retarding the social and cultural development of our young people and obstructing the personal interaction between teachers and students, both of which are basic to the learning process” (4). Some faculty agree that online course delivery, originally intended to reach a student population which otherwise would not be able to pursue college education, now serves a large number of students who are nursing hangovers in their dorms or bypassing the academic collegiate experience altogether. Many professors noticed a sharp decline in class attendance after they started to post their lecture notes on a course website in their effort to increase time for class discussion and in-depth analyses of the materials. Gregory Russell, an Associate Professor of Criminology, commented that “[R]emoving people from a setting (i.e. classroom) where they must interact with others and solve problems is self defeating” (Russell 2006, January 25). Meanwhile, we witness a large increase in students’ demands for online courses. In fact, the authors receive numerous requests to allow students to enroll in courses that are not part of the students’ programs of study for the sole purpose that the courses are offered online.

This demand for online coursework places a burden on college professors to advise students in their best interest, based on professors’ knowledge and expertise, and not to respond to students’ demands that can prove to be short sighted and self defeating. Online course delivery are very beneficial to our students’ learning in many aspects, but many courses can not be delivered online without losing the chance for students to practice performance skills that can only be carried out in the regular face-to-face classes. The authors would like to point out the disconnect between the popularity of online courses and the demands of accrediting agencies for assessment of performance in authentic settings. Gregory Russell commented, “[I]n many realms of work, much of what we know now about how people best function in organizations is by group problem solving. That is something that takes practice and an environment which supports such a process. It is difficult to teach or experience that in the typical online environment. There are ways around this, to a degree, but they are really expensive” (Personal communication, May 10, 2006). Returning to our metaphor, spas cannot deliver their expertise and service online. They know that for their clientele to receive the most benefit of such expertise, clients have to come to the spas to obtain the services.

Meanwhile, the corporate world is not happy with the quality of the college graduates and demands that universities start to revise their practices to graduate people who are ready for the workforce. One needs only to look up the directory of hospitals, technical facilities, and professional organization to come to the realization that a large number of the professionals employed by these institutions received
their training from foreign countries. Farquhar (2003) contended that our graduates of late leave higher education institutes with some work credentials, but not truly with higher education. This same sentiment was echoed by Gary Ransdell, President of Western Kentucky University (Merrow 2005). “Our national commitment to provide every qualified student, regardless of economic status, an opportunity to go to college has weakened. In many college classrooms, an unspoken ‘understanding’ allows as many as 20 percent of students to coast their way to a diploma without really learning much at all” (Merrow 2005). In other words, the opportunity to “go to college” has become less an opportunity to learn and prepare under expert and demanding faculty (like the spa) and more an opportunity to endure the seat time and come away with a generic credential (like the buffet).

Faculty Frustration

For many members of our faculty, universities have become confusing places of late: Their leaders stress the importance of teaching well, but their reward systems value research productivity; their mission statements trumpet academic freedom, but their equity policies promote “political correctness;” and professors’ training prepared them for scholarly reflection, but their managers expect them to act entrepreneurially. In addition, they believe that what they do is critical to the advancement of humanity, but their level of remuneration indicates to them that it isn’t. Consequently, because of their confusion, frustration and disappointment, they disengage from the university and its supposed devotion to the public interest (Farquhar 2003, 5).

Many professors feel that teaching is not and should not be a priority for college faculty. If these professors seek advancement and salary raises, they have to rely on research and grants, not on teaching. In fact, many of them are advised upon entering the field to focus on research and grant writing and not to spend their time on teaching responsibilities. In short, not only do students not want the restrictions of expert instructors, but members of the faculty are discouraged from functioning as directive supervisors with high expectations.

For example, professors do not assign essays or research papers because of the large number of students in their classes, lack of time and resources, and the absence of any recognition or reward for their teaching efforts. The majority of them use lecture as their predominant teaching method and use objective tests so that the responses can be easily graded by machines. All these factors lead to professors’ asking less of students and students’ expecting less from their teachers in terms of feedback and challenges.

Many universities resort to hiring part time faculty so that they don’t have to pay for benefits and so that they can hire teachers each semester based on need. Over forty-four percent of college professors are part-time employees (National Center of Education Statistics 2001). A large majority of universities relies heavily on instructors and teaching assistants with no terminal degrees who many times are under-qualified to teach the classes to which they are assigned. This practice results in some professors being forced to teach in two or three universities in order to earn salaries that are equivalent to full time salaries. Many teach between nine and eleven classes with a total enrollment of 200-300 students each semester. Professors lament that they have been transformed into assembly-line workers who are asked to teach the same content and produce the same product, very similar to assembly-line workers who are asked to produce a quota in a record time and at minimum cost per shift – or to buffet workers who spend their entire shift preparing mashed potatoes. Teachers agree that their unhappiness with their salaries and lack of resources and support for their teaching efforts
That their unhappiness with their salaries and lack of resources and support for their teaching efforts affect their desire to help students to learn. This makes teachers feel that they are not part of the institution; and, therefore, they lack loyalty to the institution and its students. Faculty members have become menial laborers, cutting celery or frying catfish, rather than the powerful expert instructors whom they once were.

Facilities

Higher education institutions offer more attractive facilities, movie theaters, students’ lounges, and online classes to attract prospective students while continuing to cut academic programs, faculty positions, and traditional classes. In short, universities have moved away from the austerity of the disciplined spa to the glitzy presentation of casino buffets. “Forget the ivory towers of academia” Semuels (2004) claimed, “Today’s college kids are demanding student centers full of frills and amenities, from a glass atrium, a sports bar, a movie theater and 24-hour study lounge to a wide array of fast food options” (¶ 3). Lewis (2003) criticized universities for spending funds on elaborate student unions in order to woo prospective students but neglecting to build libraries and academic buildings. However, Ransdell, President of Western Kentucky University, contended that universities must have that “Cool Factor” to attract students to the institution in the first place (Merrow 2005), a contention with which many faculty members disagree. For example, Kay McClenny, University of Texas at Austin, stated that such a trend is like walking “into a shiny, new supermarket. [It has] all the wheels and gadgets of a new wonderful place, but the meat is spoiled and the milk is sour. You got to attend to the fundamentals” (Merrow 2005).

Conclusion

Universities currently try to provide educational programs and services that respond to the demands of students. This move can be deemed admirable and appropriate, but Farquhar argued against such a claim by stating that “our clients will pay only for what they want, and what they want can be inconsistent with both academic values and the public interest” (2003, 4). University professors, the authors argue, should assert their authority as experts in their fields and insist on providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary not only to succeed in society after graduation but to lead society into the global future. That is, like the expert consultants at a spa, faculty members should maintain a standard for achievement no matter what their clients demand or how they whine.

Lack of funding makes schools compete for students who can pay for their education, which changes the nature of the relationship between students and professors. “We cultivate students’ unmerited pride with high praise for mediocre work. And we tolerate all of the other sins by abdicating responsibility for the culture of our classrooms” (Benton 2006, ¶ 6). Rather than pretend that our students are not “fat” and do not need assistance to “eat appropriately” and to “exercise,” members of university faculties need to establish and maintain the demands of academic achievement.

Institutes of higher education must hold the leading role of establishing academic priorities, setting expectations, and forging new cultural, academic, and technological grounds in the society. This role cannot be attained if higher education abandons such leadership in response to the market economy. “[W]e strive to live responsibly within our limited budgets; yet in constantly trying to do more with less by downsizing, restructuring, outsourcing and the like, we have cut corners, excised services and amputated programs to the extent that the quality of what we do has too often been reduced to a level that defies the public interest” (Farquhar 2003, 4). Such trends must stop in order for our society to
prosper. In the past, students came to college campuses seeking the expertise of the professors just the way that the spas’ clientele seek the expertise of the spas’ health professionals. If college professors will not assert their role as the experts in their fields and raise the bar for students’ learning, who will?

References


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