

## The President As Philosopher

by

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College presidents, it seems, are variously viewed as budget masters, lobbyists, high stakes “panhandlers,” and land development entrepreneurs, but rarely as educators and rarer still as educational philosophers. These varied views of the college president may be especially true at public institutions of higher education, for in this sector the pressures are great for mass instruction in large classes and for specific career training, often seen as the politician’s antidote for social ills. As a result, we have universities with enrollments of 50,000, lecture halls with a thousand students, and catalogs filled with college degree offerings in occupations that should either be left to on-the-job training or continuing education.

Fortunately, not all higher education is of this type, and not all college presidents are limited to the role of organizational executive. And while I will leave it to others to judge my role as a philosopher, I do have ideas on both baccalaureate and graduate education.

I believe that baccalaureate education should prepare students to learn on their own and in groups, and to be successful in careers and as citizens in an increasingly interdependent and multicultural world. I start with the premise that our graduates likely will be supervised by, or will supervise, or be neighbors of, people of other ethnic, national, racial, or religious groups, and that we as educators must design an education that will prepare them for their new world.

I also believe we should promise our students we can help them learn anything, but cannot promise to teach them everything. Students must learn to learn on their own.

I think such an education is in the liberal arts tradition, with its emphasis on language and reasoning, but also modern, with a greater emphasis on science and cultures than has been the case for “liberal arts” education in recent decades. In fact, I believe that the promises of the liberal arts have been oversold in recent years. First, most colleges which have espoused liberal education have often ignored science and the comparative study of world cultures. Second, many courses intended to fulfill lofty catalog rhetoric about the

liberal arts and sciences were designed as introductions to “mini-Ph.D.s,” i.e. majors, not as introductions to the general knowledge needed by an educated citizen.

I like to think of this modern liberal education as “liberating;” i.e., designed to liberate students from their provincial origins, no matter what their age or background. And this liberating education is found not only in the curriculum, but also in campus activities and in the community beyond the campus.

A president as philosopher knows that the curriculum, the campus, and the community represent the three major spheres of educational activity over which he or she has some influence. Therefore, we think of these areas when we initiate and support activities intended to advance students’ knowledge (both general and specialized), skills, abilities, and values.

Recent court decisions, state-level policy pronouncements, and conclusions expressed by education experts all place increasing emphasis on the student as the focus of higher education, as opposed to the teacher or faculty member. Without fanfare, but with great impact, a one-hundred-year-old trend of faculty emphasis on the development of knowledge, in contrast to the development of the student, is being called into question. While challenges to this trend have been noticed over the past several decades, never have so many voices from so many quarters focused on this one issue.

I believe there are significant consequences to this trend, and by and large they are positive. A focus on the student as compared to the faculty means a greater emphasis on learning as compared to teaching, and learning should be the basic activity of any college. By focusing on teaching, we actually give emphasis to the privileges and prerequisites of faculty. By focusing on learning, we turn attention to the needs of students.

This change in focus also has the consequences for activities on a college campus. For students, it means greater expectations for their commitment to disciplined education, because students must become active learners instead of passive recipients. For faculty, it means giving up the role as source of all knowledge, and becoming more of a facilitator of student learning, with the resources necessary for this to occur.

Historically, the emphasis on teaching has focused on the transaction between teacher as fount of knowledge and the student as recipient. In this process, the individual student is tested to see if the transaction took place. With learning as the objective, we need to assess the degree to which “transformation” has taken place; i.e., the degree to which the student, or students working as a team, have been transformed by the experience and assisted in development to a new and higher level of learning, independence, and cooperation.

Too few college presidents think of the whole of education – in the curriculum, on the campus, in the world beyond the borders of the college. Yet here on Long Island, we have campus presidents committed to serving as educational philosophers as well as to fulfilling their other roles as executive, entrepreneur, advocate, and fund raiser.