

If We're So Smart

Ken Briggs | Sep. 22, 2011 NCR Today

One of my father's at-the-ready quips to whipper snappers was "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?"

It was pure Depression era rhetoric that embedded the common American axiom that brains were meant for making money that wasn't even there after the 1929 Crash (when the smart guys went bust). It was an ironic comment, of course.

Likewise, I wonder why the American higher education system, touted widely as the world's best, isn't solving our gravest national crises and quite possibly adding to them?

Take a gander at college and university websites and you'll witness a parallel universe where "excellence" is celebrated and everything's coming up roses. Prof. X is conquering the world of gooless glue, student Y has become one of the foremost experts in Peru and the math club has returned triumphant from a tournament in New Zealand.

This is all well and good for college publicity and for the well-being of the individuals serving up these accomplishments. But what are they doing to help us as a nation go down the tubes?

Two reasons come first to mind.

One is that colleges are so intent on self-promotion that they have little time for wider concerns. The main industry on many campuses is marketing. Mounds of money are spent in a sometimes desperate attempt to place the school in the spotlight. This yields applicants which leads to improved "reputation" on the sacred US News and other rating scams which themselves rake in huge profits from playing on their clients' anxieties. The ultimate goal is the financial well-being of colleges, some of them already hideously rich already.

Colleges increasingly measure themselves by what the ranking agencies think and devote themselves to "branding" themselves to create a public image that usually matches reality only vaguely.

The websites, therefore, are pictures of achievement, genius, transcendent values and all virtues of the sainted "academy." Things are great at Success U. It's the inward looking, self-absorbed competitive attitude one would expect in a fiercely competitive society. We'll take care of ourselves, they say, and the benefits will somehow just trickle down to the general public, because, well, we're the leaven.

Which bring me to the second factor. It strikes me that higher education is so class based that most students stay almost exclusively among their own and don't get much of a grasp of the wider world.

At least this is what I've found teaching privileged students. They have been raised in comfort and relative luxury, attend college with the same cohort and meld into the corporate or professional world made up of the same people. There is no contact with any other group. They are doing splendidly and project that prospect of prosperity on everyone else without knowing the slightest thing about them.

The reason is that higher education is geared to individual goals. Little to no attention is focused on the common good. In that sense, they mirror the rest of society's obsession with personal achievement above and beyond anything else. Most faculty are in the same frame, scurrying about to improve their standing in their academic fields where the rewards are. Of the three criteria used for tenure -- teaching, scholarship and service -- the service part is by far the least emphasized and often a joke. Much of the "scholarship" concerns narrow, irrelevant minutiae that bears no relationship whatever to solving the threatening social problems.

It's no wonder that the segmentation of higher education by class fosters class self-interest. The extreme to which it's gone further hampers efforts to turn smarts outward and cooperatively toward our plagues.

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