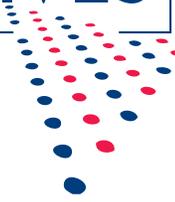


PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



*A HIGHER
EDUCATION
PRESIDENTIAL
THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP
SERIES*

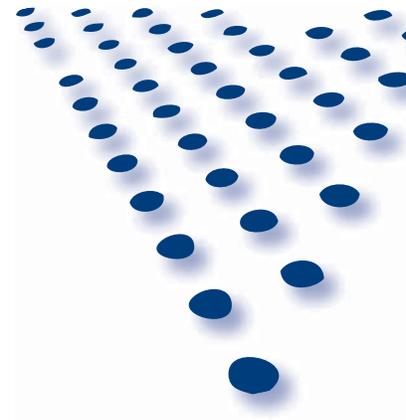
2012-2013 Series:

Responding to the Commoditization of Higher Education

Chapter

9:

**Higher Education:
*A Complicated Commodity in a
Clamorous Marketplace***



Higher Education:

A Complicated Commodity in a Clamorous Marketplace

Dr. Eric Gilbertson: President of Saginaw Valley State University

There was a time — a gentler time, perhaps — when poets would pen loving lines about universities. Read Masefield (1953): “There are few earthly things more splendid than a university. In these days of broken frontiers and collapsing values... wherever a university stands, it stands and shines; wherever it exists, the free minds of men, urged on to full and fair inquiry, may still bring wisdom to human affairs.”

And there was a time when even hard-bitten lawyers would passionately defend (pro bono, I think) the alma mater of their youth against political or economic assaults. Hear Daniel Webster before the Supreme Court in the historic Dartmouth College Case: “It is, Sir, as I have said, a small College. And yet, there are those who love it” (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961).

It used to be as well that fiction portrayed academics as dewy-eyed idealists or tweedy eccentrics who stumbled upon discoveries like “flubber,” or who struggled valiantly to tutor learning-resistant pupils.

And it used to be that the lions of our political theaters would wax eloquent about the vital role of higher education in a democratic society. Jefferson’s self-authored tombstone inscription proclaimed that he was founder of a university — not mentioning that he had been President of the United States. And his was the very democratic idea that education alone would allow a “national aristocracy of the talented” to rise up and defeat an “artificial” aristocracy based on privilege at birth (Neem, 2006).

In times past, university presidents would — without embarrassment — rhapsodize the lofty goals and celebrate the inefficient peculiarities of their institutions. A. Bartlett Giamatti (1988): “The university... is a constant conversation between young and old... a conversation between past and present, a conversation the culture has with itself, on behalf of the country.... Perhaps it is the sound of all those voices, over centuries overlapping... that is finally the music of civilization.”



On its best days, the university can and still does stand for the better ideals and higher hopes of an imperfect nation and world.”





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And Harold Enarson (1973): The university is “not just another organization.... It is more like the Metropolitan Opera than the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. It is more like a church than a factory; more like a research lab than the highway department. They are as fragile as truth itself is fragile.... and it is a marvel that the public at large supports with its dollars an institution that is independent, free-standing, openly critical of the conventional wisdom, friendly to disputation, enchanted with controversy, hospitable to those who ‘think otherwise.’ May it always be so.”

We just don’t seem to talk like that anymore.

* * *

In the day and age to which we have been assigned, much of this romantic idealism now seems quaint, hopelessly antiquated, almost comically naïve.

Poets seem no longer smitten with a love of learning. Ungrateful and unloving lawyers now see their alma maters as just another ripe target for their predations. In contemporary fiction, academics are less likely to be portrayed as winsome bookworms than are as sexual predators or narcissistic louts.

Interestingly, the one aspect of the higher education enterprise that somehow maintains a strong hold on the public’s sentimental imagination is big-time athletics. There persists a stubborn but pleasant fiction that the typical heroic competitor really is just another student who sheds his letter sweater and sets aside his books to represent his slightly less physically gifted classmates in exuberant competition — or that lavishly compensated coaches really are just noble builders of character.

As for political leadership... well, the current Leader of the Free World — himself the victim of not inexpensive institutions, Columbia and Harvard — is loudest in his populist bashing about tuition: “Let me put colleges and universities on notice: If you can’t stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down” (Stanton, 2012). (Aren’t cuts in public funding precisely why tuition has risen as it has?) Today’s political vision for the role of higher education seems focused on “affordability” and employment training.

So, what happened to all that romantic idealism... all that affectionate cultural imagery... all that unquestioning faith in the irresistible worth of academic institutions and of academics themselves? And how is it that higher education has become just another commodity to be bought and sold in an unsentimental economic marketplace?

* * *

As we lament the commoditization of higher education we might consider that the fault — or at least some of the fault — may be “not in our stars, but in ourselves” (Shakespeare 1.2.146–147).

Today, alas, college and university presidents themselves seem more likely to tout their institution’s prowess at wealth generation, or the cost savings they have ruthlessly wrung from unproductive departments, or the pecuniary achievements of their graduates, than their institution’s higher purposes (Ross, 2011). In this tougher, stingier, and less forgiving day and age, “captains of erudition” (Thorsten Veblen’s mocking descriptor of university presidents) have, perhaps, too readily — if not too cheerfully — seized the moment and pandered to contemporary moods.

Governors and captains of industry want job creation? We got it — just free up the imaginations of our scientists and engineers and we’ll turn every vacant lot into a slice of Silicon Valley or Research Triangle. And so ambitious

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institutions with scant research capacity eagerly build research parks and business incubators, and the resulting return on those investments — save at a precious few major research institutions — is, not surprisingly, unspectacular.

And is higher education really “worth” it? You bet — data trotted out and elaborately displayed purports to show how much more college grads make in a year or lifetime. And placement rates? Everyone knows that the only unemployed (forget under-unemployed) grads are those melancholy artists and dreamy literati who were ill-advised in their choice of majors.

Actually, of course, those credentialed from their higher learning enjoy, on average, substantially more riches than those not so pedigreed — though engineers and accountants do tend to take home larger paychecks than poets and philosophers (Supiano, 2011). No surprises there.

It’s also not clear, however, just how much the degree really does contribute to anyone’s financial success. Those who go to college probably start out more motivated and talented and may have done better anyway. Higher education is also felicitously placed in the convenient position of a licensing gatekeeper to remunerative professions.

But could it be that — in our eagerness to accommodate the reigning sentiments of the moment — higher education has, just possibly, over-promised its short-term economic impact but under-sold its historic social and cultural value?

* * *

There are certainly some understandable reasons for the loss of much sweet solicitude about higher education. It seems that it really is “the economy, stupid.” And in tougher times with even higher prices, it shouldn’t be surprising that lofty rhetoric about the love of learning and whimsical notions about the peculiar virtues of academic institutions have lost much of their force and delight.

A persistent trend toward vocalism in higher education may also have something to do with this. But this too is nothing new. Hutchins (1936) deplored the “ruinous” influence of “vocalism” on higher learning in his treatises of the 1930s. Still, the pressures of economic uncertainties — particularly as higher education has become less a province of the elite as more students of modest means contemplate taking on significant debt — force the question of not “whether” someone is going to college but “why” or “to become what?” And merely to become “an educated person” comes across as a pretty lame answer.

Critics showcase high-profile entrepreneurs who dropped out of prestigious halls of ivy. And, yes, there are countless contented people who earn a decent living and live fulfilling lives without ever having darkened the door of a college classroom — ominous trends in this regard notwithstanding. Point taken.

And those questions about the “value” of higher education keep coming too. Economist Robert Samuelson (2012) opines that “(I)t’s time to drop the college-for-all crusade.” Former Secretary of Education William Bennett (2012) surveys the problems of student debt and urges families to ask, “how, when, where, for whom, in what studies and at what cost is a college education appropriate?” Political candidates debate whether universal access to college

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is a frivolous notion; some then charge that its proponents are snobs (Fain, 2012). *How many degree-holding bartenders do we really need?* others derisively ask (Weber, 2012). And even the American Council on Education's magazine (2011) mirrors the self-doubt of the academy with this blazing headline: "Is College Still Worth It?"

But perhaps the companion question is what is truly important: How is "its" true "worth" to be measured — or understood?

* * *

In a cultural and political climate that is unenchanted with academic custom and unforgiving of academic inefficiency, it is sometimes difficult to remember — much less extol — the idealism that once drew youthful dreamers to grad school and the hope of a life and career in the groves of academe. It may well be too that we have all grown older and more cynical in a world that has come to expect cynicism — and may even honor and reward it.

To state the obvious, college and university presidents cannot be blithely oblivious — or risk seeming arrogantly indifferent — to current political concerns or to the problems or anxieties of the people their institutions serve. Job creation is a priority for our states and regions. Of course an academic experience and credential isn't for everyone. Tuition is a barrier and a burden, and costs should be contained. Student debt-loads and the careers that will pay them off are of no small consequence — to students or the economy generally. Our nation and states and cities do need more STEMS graduates and more clever entrepreneurs and more skilled healthcare professionals. And we can and should extend opportunity — if not reduce costs — through the wonders of technology. No one wants to wallow in some goofy nostalgia or seem hopelessly out of touch with these hard realities. And all these things do matter — they matter very much.

But are they *all* that matters? Doesn't the appreciation of the humanities and those other splendidly irrelevant disciplines still matter? Don't the development of "critical thinking" and enlightened citizenship and the habits of boundless curiosity and healthy skepticism still count? Isn't the motivation and intellectual development of that unprecocious and under-prepared freshman still an imperative in this aspiring democratic society?

Surely an academic institution does play an important role in creating economic prosperity for states and nations; and surely too, it is one potential pathway to personal riches. But beyond its mere economic utility, isn't the role of the university as a safe forum for controversial ideas, as the conservator of culture, as a sanctuary for idealism and idealists — and even as a haven for unique characters — also still vital to what we aspire to be, as a society and as a people?

Aren't the academy's traditional values and inefficient ways — small classes and probing conversations, annoyingly disputatious departments, even the clumsy contraptions of shared governance — still vitally important to these vital institutions?

Shouldn't the university — at its best — still be an ongoing "conversation between past and present" (Neem, 2006), "independent... openly critical of conventional wisdom, friendly to disputation... hospitable to those who think otherwise" and as "fragile as truth itself is fragile" (Giamatti, 1988)?

It's time — it's past time — to speak out again about these things. The passions of the poets or the tender eloquence of academics past may not resonate with the worried and stressed and economically obsessed world

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around us. But that world is also increasingly skeptical about the purely economic investment value of what colleges and universities are and do. Now is the time to re-state the value proposition for the academic experience and for academic institutions — not with a paean for the myths of times past, but with a due respect, even a slight touch of reverence, for at least some of the habits and most of the values that do matter most.

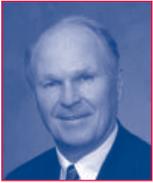
On its best days, the university can and still does stand for the better ideals and higher hopes of an imperfect nation and world. And on those best days, young and youngish people come — in moments of great vulnerability and great promise — and are changed, almost always for the better. If it works right — and it so often does — they emerge not just more competent but more creative, not just more acquisitive but more appreciative, not just more ambitious but more purposeful, more reflective. In short, if it works right they become more fully human — possibly even humane.

None of this happens to everyone in every institution or every classroom on every day. But it does happen. We've seen it happen for others; it happened for us. That's worth explaining and defending — without embarrassment or apology, and with a lot more fearless conviction.

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Dr. Eric R. Gilbertson became President of Saginaw Valley State University in August 1989. Since his arrival, enrollments have grown by more than 85 percent; endowments have grown twenty-fold and the physical campus has tripled in size. Prior to becoming President of Saginaw Valley State University, he served for eight years as President of Johnson State College in Vermont, and prior to that for seven years as the Executive Assistant to the President of Ohio State University. He also served as Law Clerk to the Honorable Robert M. Duncan, Justice, the Supreme Court of Ohio.

President Gilbertson has traveled and lectured extensively in Asia while developing several student and faculty exchange programs. He is particularly committed to international educational exchanges, and under his leadership, the University has developed and expanded sister-institution relationships with universities in Japan, India, and Taiwan, including Shikoku University, Ming Chuan University, and Shih Hsin University.

President Gilbertson is active in various professional and community service organizations, and he regularly teaches a course in Constitutional Law, his area of particular interest. He has also authored numerous speeches and articles on subjects ranging from higher education to organizational leadership to constitutional law.

He earned his undergraduate degree from Bluffton College, an M.A. in Economics from Ohio University, and a J.D. (cum laude) from Cleveland State University.