

Is the Quality of the American Undergraduate Education Declining? What Responsibility Do Faculty Have for Maintaining Quality?

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SESSION DESCRIPTION

This will be a moderated forum led by the panelists but designed to interact with the audience and include them in the discussion. The panelists have experience leading similar sessions and will begin by presenting their perspectives then those attending will be asked to react to what was said and to present their perspectives. This format has proven to be effective in engaging the people who had enough interest in the title to attend the session. This allows everyone to learn from each other.

There are many issues involved in determining if the quality of university undergraduate education is declining. Most everyone would agree that the American university experience has changed over the last 20 years. We have seen legislators in many states express their concern about the quality of K-12 education and have mandated state-wide testing to assess the quality of education. There is concern that the same will happen for state supported institutions of higher education if we do not maintain the quality of undergraduate educations. What are the characteristics of a quality education? Legislators and others outside of the universities have expressed concern about retention rates at universities and have established retention rates as a criterion to be used to assess the quality for institutions of higher education. As universities focus on retention of students they seek to improve the overall university experience for undergraduates. The amenities provided have changed significantly. Is this pampering of students extending into the academic side or just remaining in the social side? As universities focus on improving retention, is there an increased pressure on faculty to retain students to a degree that faculty are relaxing standards and allowing weaker students to obtain undergraduate degrees?

We know that the skills and knowledge needed to be successful today and in the future are not the same set of skills and knowledge needed 20 years ago due to the changes in technology and other developments. However many would argue the basic necessary reasoning and communication

abilities have not changed just because of the technology available for communication and computation.

The university experience has always been about more than just an academic education. Has the emphasis on other aspects of campus life increased in recent years to the detriment of the academic activities? Universities promote these life-style offerings of the university as they recruits students. Is this a reflection of a change in motivation of the in-coming students? Are they really coming for an academic education? Where is an academic education on their priority list? If an education is not high on their list, then how do we as faculty educate them in a way that will cause them to elevate its importance?

At one time in our educational system K-12 students were given aptitude and IQ tests and then put in tracks such as college prep, vocational, and general—much like systems in Europe and Asia still do and they outscore us in all testing. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s (and continuing to today) this system was changed by the education reformers who argued that tracking negatively affected the self esteem of the students and caused them permanent scaring of their psyches. Thus everyone was allowed to take whatever courses they wanted (or that their parents wanted them to take) and all were encouraged to take SATs and ACTs and apply to colleges. Organizations like Educational Testing Service did not complain as this meant more business for them. Colleges did not complain because this meant more students which meant more revenues. Parents did not complain because they could then brag about their kids being in college. But we are putting more and more students into college who are not prepared for real college level work and who should not be there so we have to do remediation rather than present real higher education just in order to get them to a minimum level of achievement.

This self esteem movement has had serious ramifications for education as seen in grade inflation, social promotions, a lessening of discipline, and the creation of an attitude of entitlement towards higher education in which if you, as a faculty member, do not post a good grade for a student, you are viewed as being at fault and the student is thus a victim of the system. Today's faculty are on the defensive. The quality movement emphasizes satisfying the customer and in higher education the main focus has been on attracting customers (students) by appealing to their immediate wants and wishes. We have not focused on our real customers, society and the future employers of our graduates.

There is media coverage about reports showing that we are far behind in all measures of academic achievement even though we have the world highest percentage of college graduates. We are graduating people who should not have even been admitted into college in the first place, just so we do not hurt their self esteem and lose money at the institutional level.

This session may raise more questions than providing answers. Before one can come with answers, one must first think about the questions. If faculty do not think about these questions then it will be legislators and administrators who will be providing the answers. Our institutions of higher education are world-class because we have had strong faculty leading our academic process. There are no definitive answers but the session will point out that faculty should take responsibility for maintaining quality in their classes. If faculty do not do it then they are abdicating a primary faculty responsibility. Maintaining academic quality should be supported by legislators and administrators but the primary responsibility should rest with faculty.