

The Idea of the University

Burn, Baby, Burn!

Part of a continuing series of articles

by Earl J. Moniz

Using the refrain "the only way to save the university is to burn it to the ground" to continue our examination of the current state of the Idea of the University may at first seem quite ridiculous. An argument might be constructed however, in favor of such a plan if the examination is conducted in a more deliberate, intellectual, and pragmatic fashion.

The argument is based on three basic premises: (1) the actual destruction of the physical plant is not the true objective and never intends to be an actual goal of the exercise, (2) the argument is conducted on an intellectual level with students as full participatory partners and not simply the victims of the decisions of the university administration, and (3) the examination is conducted through a comparison between the traditional interpretation of a university and the current structure. With those qualifiers fully understood, the examination of the refrain above can now continue.

During the period of the 1960s, the discussions surrounding the intellectual reformation of the university were interpreted by many administrators and faculty members to be the ACTUAL and complete physical destruction of the university. To use a currently popular phrase, "They just didn't get it!"

On a few campuses, a backlash to this reformation movement to kill the liberal arts education sprouted. Individuals advocated that the true growth and progress of any society was its ability to continue to educate its population in traditional subjects that taught students how to think and to search for the truth independently and not simply obtain work and make a decent wage. These individuals sincerely believed in the liberal arts college as the root of all progress and growth not only in our own society but also as a standard to which other cultures and countries could compare their own growth and development. They resented and very aggressively resisted the attempts to turn colleges and universities into simple training schools for big business. They believed the only way to keep the notion of a truly democratic liberal arts education alive was not to allow any external or internal influences deter the schools from their democratic traditions. As their cause began to fall, they turned to militant activities and slogans. The result of one of these militant groups, in order to prevent the tinkering with the traditional education process, proudly proclaimed that the only way to save the truly noble objective of a liberal arts education from being contaminated with modern training school rhetoric and structure was to destroy the instrument of that change. Hence, the slogan "The only way to save the (Idea of the) University is

to burn it to the ground!"

For the sake of argument, we will now begin to visualize the complete structural and intellectual reconstruction of a Fictitious State University. To begin this reconstruction, we will imagine that we wake up one morning and find that we have inherited a university whose campus is completely devoid of faculty, administrators, and students. Through the next series of articles, an examination will be presented using the premises delineated above.

We will begin our discussion today with the process through which we would recruit caring, concerned, and cooperative individuals for employment as administrators at all levels of our university. What recruitment procedures should be implemented? What types of people should be selected to fill the administrative positions through which students will be assisted and advised during their collegiate career? Should any employment stipulations in reference to their individual educations be placed on these individuals during their employment?

Where do we begin? I would recommend that we begin with getting an administration with which the actual functioning of the university may be accomplished. Where would we look for individuals that would come and work for the specific offices and agencies of the university? Simple. We would ask for volunteers! Isn't that a ridiculous suggestion? Let us take a closer look.

In the beginning, scholarly endeavors were cooperative in nature. Those who had the knowledge were willing to share it with those who were interested in learning more. Universities were nothing more than forums in which open discussions took place. Through these discussions, viewpoints were exchanged and new theories were developed. Individuals would take these theories home with them and attempt to verify or refute them. They would return to the forum and bring their new discoveries with them. No time frame for graduation or "class periods" structure existed.

If we apply this same notion of cooperativeness to the administration of a university, individuals who desire to participate in intellectual discussions and theoretical research endeavors would naturally want to be associated with these centers of activities. They would be willing to provide some service for a short period of time during their day if they would be allowed to participate in scholarly discussions from

time to time. The underlying concept of this notion is "why pay people to do something that they would not be interested in doing for free?"

Although this concept is not very popular today for employment purposes, the concept still exists through which individuals may gain valuable field experience and possible employment. Cooperative learning opportunities like those offered through The Career Placement Center represent one such program. In the field of education, the student teaching experience is also an avenue through which perspective teachers demonstrate their abilities and skills to possible employers in the public school systems. Many organizations permit voluntary service to exist. When a person of exceptional ability is encountered, that person is frequently of-

ferred a permanent position with pay. The American Red Cross would be an example of this type of organization.

So, the university now has individuals voluntarily contributing their time

and energy in offices at the university for the opportunity to expand their horizons in classes and research projects of their choice from time to time. Those volunteers who prove themselves to be capable in their duties and sincere in their concern about the welfare of students and the growth of the university may be offered permanent positions. Ultimately, people with special skills and abilities to function in leadership positions must be hired from the start without any volunteer service requirement on their part. These people would be educated in specific fields that would be required by the university. These leadership positions should be filled with people who have been scrutinized with input from the employees who will be working for that particular leader. The employees should ensure that their leader has the same educational goals as the individuals who are doing the work and assisting the students. Individuals who affix specific departmentalized objectives for themselves and their departments cannot be considered to be seeking the university ideals of expanding educational horizons of the students who attend the university and should consequently be dropped from further employment deliberations.

Leadership candidates must demonstrate a willingness to hold the intellectual growth of students and the intellectual integrity of the university above all else. Sectional and territorial rivalries and a proprietary attitude about knowledge

should be discouraged from the outset by not allowing any individual to be hired who fails to understand that one is simply making a contribution to the entire university ideal and is not solely responsible for the development of any group of students or department of the university.

Once any university has hired scholarly, educated, and dedicated individuals who are concerned about concentrating their collective efforts on the education of its students; no single individual can prevent that university from becoming successful in any of its endeavors. So, now, Fictitious State University has filled its administrative offices with concerned, knowledgeable, and dedicated individuals who will assist students and participate as students where they feel compelled. These individuals would also assist with the educational endeavors of all other volunteers serving that department with their abilities to educate students. The more experienced volunteers act both as teachers on the job helping others to learn the most efficient methods of helping students and as students in the classroom pursuing their individual educational objectives. "Whatever makes you a better person also makes you a better soldier," was often used in the military to indicate that education is not an obstacle or hindrance to military service. The same principle can be applied here as well. If an individual continues to grow and develop, the service that that person provides will also improve.

Let us recap our accomplishments. All barriers of jealousy, resentment, and protectionism have been eliminated and the sole existence for any office or agency is to ensure that the education of each student is completed successfully with a minimal amount of interference from outside distractors. Students should feel that their only purpose for being on the campus is to get the best possible education they can before vaulting themselves into the world of work (as if being a student is not work!). Department heads ensure that the administrative procedures that are required for students to graduate are conducted in an open, cooperative, and encouraging manner through their interactions with other departments and especially with the students being supported.

What an innovative and exciting ideal...! Many educational studies have indicated that these types of encouraging and nurturing environments are mandatory for many youngsters in elementary school to grow and develop satisfactorily. Do the studies mean to imply that those types of nurturing and encouraging techniques are no longer important once a person grows up or progresses beyond one's teenage years? I think not...most assuredly not!

Next article:

Where do we go from here?

Imagine that we wake up one morning and find that we have inherited a university.