Selling Higher Education

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Dear faithful colleagues,

I swear it was yesterday that our first child, a son, was born, while my wife and I were house parents for the Tri Delta sorority at the University of Maryland. Today that son, Brayden, is heading into his senior year in high school, and so, we are on a whirlwind college tour. My career in higher education has become more personal than ever.

On our first visit, Brayden was impressed by the tour guide’s sales pitch of the “blue lights” visible from anywhere on campus and the business school programs where students manage university dollars in the stock market. He was a bit surprised and then deflated to learn that every school we have visited has these same blue lights and stock market investing program. It seems every school also has state-of-the-art athletic facilities and fitness centers. One campus even showcased its “tanning” pool in addition to several regular swimming pools. While Brayden has discovered the striking commonality of these assets intended to seem like unique possessions at each institution, I keep thinking about what it costs to “make the sale” of higher education. At universities across the country, it seems “keeping up with the Joneses” is still the name of the game, and it’s expensive.

It’s not just the physical plants we’re selling either—it’s the promise of jobs. Truth told, I’ve been somewhat startled by the strength of this narrative. High-impact practices such as internships, undergraduate research, and study abroad are especially touted because these experiences lead to “good jobs.” As one admissions recruiter offered, “we find that students who do these things (internships, undergraduate research and study abroad) are very attractive to employers.”

As I listen to campus after campus extol the high percentage of participation in high-impact practices, I can’t help but hear John Tagg’s warning in *The Learning Paradigm College* that educational “means” often seductively become “ends.” Initially, high-impact practices were right-minded means for strengthening student learning. Soon, these programs yielded a strategic marketing advantage, and the rapid scale up began, often at the cost of providing truly robust learning experiences. Just as we want the best athletic facilities to recruit student athletes, we also want “hot programs” to sell to students and parents.

Perhaps the recent Wabash Study findings are an early warning sign that something is awry. This large-scale, longitudinal study investigating critical factors affecting the outcomes of liberal arts education indicate that these high-impact programs influence student learning in only limited ways. The effect of these programs, according to Charles F. Blaich and Kathleen Wise, “Depends primarily on whether these programs create the core teaching practices and conditions that promote student learning. If the faculty and staff at an institution are not adept at creating these practices and conditions, adding new programs will not matter” (p. 1). One case in point, as highlighted in Ernest T. Pascarella and Charles Blaich’s “Lessons from the
The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education," is the discovery that there is little systematic evidence that study abroad programs are fostering intercultural competence, despite the often-declared aim to do so. While participation and cost is climbing, the intended learning, unfortunately, is not.

I am up to my eyelids in shiny admissions pitches, and I am ready to admit I want to hear less about jobs and more about learning, becoming, and discovering. I want to ask the question, out loud, right in the middle of all the anxious parents and all the starry-eyed students and all the institutional cheerleaders, “What is the real value of a college education?”

If the answers are not learning and transformation, is a college education worth it? I do not have easy answers to offer, but perhaps, we should all look more closely at what we are selling and understand clearly how our sales pitch aligns with our institution’s mission and personal values. I have a hunch, however, that the better we are at offering educations that are truly learning-focused and student-centered, the more likely meaningful employment and world-changing kinds of graduates will be entering society. That seems like really good news.

With Hope,

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