

Where is the Heart and Soul of the Academy?

By Jerry L. Wyett

This article arises out of my concern that the client or customer-centered business model now in vogue in academe—with its attendant reliance on a need to please students, legislators, trustees, and a host of special interest groups with narrow and often competing agendas—is a threat to the *heart* and *soul* of the academy.

My first experience with higher education was at a large urban university in the 1950s. I came from a small town and was the first child of an essentially rural agrarian family to attend college.

I soon learned that a world existed about which I knew nothing: new people, new ideas, and professors with strange personalities and colorful language, who seemed totally unencumbered by most of the conventions with which I was reared. It was frightening, overwhelming and frustrating. It was exciting. It was educational. It was all of the things that scared me and that I so desperately needed.

At first I felt this was not a good thing. Shouldn't everyone be just like me? Sure, I guess, if I wanted to continue to be just like me. But I didn't—I wanted to be educated. So part of the price I had to pay was to be subjected to an environment that challenged me and my value system.

In retrospect, I realize that true education must take place in an environment that challenges students even if the challenge is uncomfortable. Unfortunately, in the current climate of the academy, such challenges may often be construed as providing poor customer service.

The real impact of my educational experience was carried by the force of the personalities of my professors. They were an incredible group. Some were old, some young, some male, some female, some nice, some not so nice, all seemingly free to be whatever they chose to be, and all concerned about challenging the somewhat conventional

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ideas of a young man who grew up in a sheltered environment.

They changed my life. For that I am grateful. I have tried to emulate them to the degree that they seemed to see as their fundamental mission helping me to challenge everything I believed. To do so, they needed academic freedom. Fortunately they had it.

I remember fondly, some 44 years later, a professor I had for English composition. He was young, intelligent, provocative, and, in my youthful eyes, totally crazy. One beautiful fall morning when we arrived for class, we were asked by our professor if we had noticed the beauty of the morning and how fresh the air smelled.

When we all conceded that we had noticed, he told us in his most authoritative voice that the fresh smell of country air was in fact a result of the decay of goose dung.

I didn't believe him and couldn't contain myself, so he and I argued about fresh air, goose dung, and other things for much of the class period. I'm not sure, even today, that he wasn't crazy, but I believe he was just trying to provoke us.

Many might see what he did in his interaction with me as irrelevant, even superfluous by today's standards. I certainly would have given him the lowest possible scores on a student evaluation.

But, as I changed and became more aware of my own thinking, my feelings about him changed. That was the whole idea, wasn't it?

This professor wasn't trying to satisfy a client. The concept of satisfying a client is immediate. It has an urgency in the present. Educating a young mind has no such immediacy.

While I believed that my professors cared about me and were invested in my success, their priority was not to please me, coddle me, or make me happy. Their priority was to *educate* me.

Had my professors felt they needed to please me, they might have been as lifeless and mediocre as much of what passes for enlightenment in today's classrooms.

I do not mean this to be disrespectful of my colleagues who have dedicated their lives to lighting their corners of the world. It is, rather, a plea to all who would attack the fundamental mission of the academy to move carefully and deliberately lest irreparable harm be done to a cornerstone of our democratic heritage.

My discipline is teacher education. My specific responsibility is field experience. My students work in the public schools where they regularly come upon values, attitudes, ideas, and behaviors vastly different from their own.

I used to talk freely with them

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about what to expect and how to prepare for what they might encounter. Topics such as race, gender, ethnicity, and sex are common currency in K-12 classrooms everywhere. No topic was off limits in our discussions because they all were likely to come up during a teaching career.

Today, I'm reluctant to approach any topic that might offend my so-called *clients*. This, despite the fact, that if all of these sensitive topics had been excluded from my own education, it would have become sterile and meaningless. The *soul* would have been removed.

Allow me to illustrate. My professors were free to antagonize, even provoke me, in order to make me think and evaluate my beliefs. This was the *soul* of my education.

Recently, a colleague of mine who teaches ethics was discussing the power of attitudes in her class. Her students contended that attitudes were private and only behavior was a matter of public concern.

To illustrate the power of language in shaping attitudes, she used the word "nigger." The word was deliberately used to provoke an emotional response and to further stimulate the discussion.

Most of the class understood. But one student took offense, filed a complaint, and my colleague

was brought before an appeals board where she was severely reprimanded.

If you find yourself wondering while you are reading this, as I did while writing it, if I should use the actual word that provoked the response, then my point is already made.

In another area, the issue of student-professor contact has become so sexually loaded that many, if not most, professors experience great reluctance, even fear, of any kind of physical contact with their students.

I'm not referring here to sexual exploitation that crosses reasonable boundaries of propriety but to the display of affection or support that might be a hug or a compliment on one's appearance or dress.

This has been defined by some as constituting an "unwanted sexual advance." This attitude has created such an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that many professors are no longer willing to even talk to students behind a closed door even though many situations require this level of privacy.

A case in point involves an incident which actually happened to a colleague and me. We were accused by a student of sexual harassment and summoned to the office of the Director of the Women's Commission to discuss the issue.

We were told that a complaint

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had been made. We were also told that we couldn't be told who had made the complaint or any specifics about what we had done to precipitate the complaint.

We were charged by an unknown person with an unknown offense. It was suggested that we attend a workshop on sexual harassment and carefully monitor our behavior.

Nothing further occurred, except that we were left with the feeling that a cloud was placed over us and we had no way to dissipate it. I hope such an incident has never occurred anywhere else in the academy. But I suspect that others have had similar experiences.

It is not the point here to debate the merits of these particular examples but, rather, to illustrate how the interaction between multiculturalism, political correctness, radical feminism, and the "piece work," headcount method of funding education serve to sterilize and sanitize relationships between student and professor.

I realize that these terms lack specific definition and are open to interpretation. This lack of definition is at the very center of the problem.

The issue is not that the agendas of the special interest groups lack validity or should be denied a voice but that the influence of these

groups often have a chilling effect on the climate of freedom which is so fundamental to the health of the academy.

The over-reliance on models borrowed from business and industry has exacerbated the situation. This corporate mentality infects the academy with a mentality that sees the generation of student credit hours and an increase in headcount as the primary measure of success.

Many will point out, quite correctly, that we have other measures of success in higher education. My point is that our society is overly reliant on money as the ultimate measure of worth, that we place our money where our values lie. As a result, we pander to students whose evaluation of performance becomes the ultimate measure of our success.

For administrators, student retention becomes the number one priority. They must make decisions based not on educational value but rather on the reality of their economic impact.

This is often due to the practice of many state legislatures who tie higher education appropriations directly to headcount and student credit hours. The practice is strangely reminiscent of factories that pay their employees by piece work. The greater the number of

parts produced, the greater the pay.

Clearly, producing educated, thoughtful students is not analogous to operating an automatic screw machine or a punch press. But it appears no one is challenging the legislative bodies that determine appropriations about the wisdom of such funding practices.

We have seen in the past two decades the result of business and industry making decisions based solely on the so called "bottom line." Companies have downsized, reorganized, and internationalized without regard to the human costs of such practices. The terrible price often paid for such "efficiency" in the lives of people has been largely ignored or seen as a necessary cost of doing business. We dare not allow this kind of thinking to destroy the fabric of the academy.

If we believe that an informed electorate and a free citizenry are fundamental to a democratic society, we must resist attempts to define the academy in purely economic terms. The role of higher education in a democracy has always been to challenge its citizens to think and act freely without fear.

To protect this tradition, we need to pay special attention to those who would trivialize it. We need to pay attention to those things whose value transcends their economic costs.

Historically, our society's support of education has paid dividends that far exceeded their cost. If we fail to continue this tradition, we do so at our own peril. At stake is the heart and soul of the academy. ■