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Stunting higher-ed reforms: arrogance and ignorance

BY AARON W. HUGHEY

I have spent my entire professional life in higher education. I have four degrees from four different institutions. Over the last 40 years, I have been a student, a staff member, a mid-level administrator and a professor.

In short, I have experienced the institution from all possible perspectives.

From my vantage point, there are two major misconceptions about academia that continue to be perpetuated both within and without the ivory tower. Moreover, I feel these fallacies are the principal reasons most colleges and universities — indeed the entire higher education enterprise — has fallen on such dire straits in recent years.

First, there is the somewhat persistent myth that people who have acquired more formal education are not as biased, judgmental or bigoted as their “less-accomplished” counterparts.

Contrary to popular belief among many colleagues, I have come to the conclusion those who inhabit our campuses include some of the most prejudiced, intolerant and narrow-minded human beings in the world.

I am not necessarily talking about race and gender, although a good case could be made for discrimination on those fronts considering the lack of diversity in many departments.

No, I am referring to the self-righteous indignation many academics have toward those who are not as enlightened as they obviously see themselves as being.

Although there are many who rise above this petty nonsense, I can point to a few less than admirable tendencies exhibited by some of my associates on a daily basis.

For instance, some faculty seem to despise administrators, who are often quick to return the favor. Then there are those who denigrate their colleagues in other colleges and departments in order to reinforce a delusional sense of superiority.

Moreover, people with doctorates are often dismissive of those without them; I have been in meetings where exceptionally talented individuals were ignored simply because their name didn't begin with “Dr.”

And maybe I missed the memo, but who said the PhD should be the gold standard when it comes to terminal degrees and all alternative credentials should therefore be maligned as inherently second-rate?

Maybe if we all focused more on doing the equally important jobs we were hired to do, and less on trying to enhance our place in the pecking order, our students would be better served.

Prejudice will exist as long as some have an egotistical and self-serving need to see themselves as better than those around them.

The second problem we have in higher education involves our relatively naïve understanding of the insights and abilities it takes to lead a modern university — and especially what it takes to acquire those competencies.

Being a leader in today's complex, fast-paced global economy requires a vast array of knowledge and skills.

I believe most senior managers I have worked with in the private sector over the last 30 years would affirm this as relatively self-evident. I am also convinced many of my colleagues in academia do not have the capacity to grasp such a simple concept.

Before rising to the ranks of mid-management, those aspiring to lead others in business and industry are expected to have extensive training and professional development, in addition to years of supervisory experience encompassing progressively higher levels of responsibility.

In higher education, however, we continue to cling to this antiquated notion that anyone can assume a key leadership position simply by having been in the classroom for a few semesters or attending an abbreviated boot camp designed to get them up to speed.

The reality is it doesn't. Bogus arguments about how academic culture is qualitatively different from other types of organizational environments notwithstanding, a primary reason colleges and universities are experiencing such immense difficulties these days is because we have too many leaders who have no clue what they are doing. Moreover, these same folks routinely denigrate those who have made the study of administration the focus of their career aspirations.

Running a university requires competencies most faculty simply do not possess. It's high time we stopped romanticizing a bygone era and started demanding our leaders have degrees related to the responsibilities they are being asked to assume.

Although it may not seem so at first blush, I am actually remarkably optimistic about the future of higher education. I believe we are on the threshold of reaching the required level of pain necessary to initiate changes those outside the academic bubble have been advocating for decades.

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