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Helping Students Help Themselves

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In higher education today, there is a battle raging, a battle between students and university administrations (Brown & Churchill). The source of the tension is a disconnection between what universities want to offer and what today's student consumers want to buy. After analyzing the position of each side, two things will be seen as paramount. First, that while student consumers have the right to purchase whatever they would like, universities also have the right to offer the programs that they feel best fulfill their mission. This understanding will account for the new type of "for profit" higher-education institutions cropping up today. Secondly, it will be evident that universities have an obligation to make clear the intent of their offerings, the full cost to the student in terms of both time and financial resources, and what the meaning of a conferred degree is.

The purpose of a university is to broaden students' critical thinking about the world around them. The origin of the word "university" from the Latin *universitas* suggests a "whole" and "unifying" process. A university teaches students the many areas of inquiry about life, both the material world and the philosophical world comprising a broader area of learning than just a few classes in a core division (Merriam Webster). The message of a well rounded education is typically found in every university's Mission Statement. The University of Memphis's College of Communication Sciences and Disorders has published a statement which says, "The University of Memphis is a learner-centered metropolitan research university providing high quality educational experiences while pursuing new knowledge through research, artistic expression, and interdisciplinary and engaged scholarship" (The University of Memphis). The purpose of a university then, has a far better and loftier goal than simply pumping people out of school to get jobs. Achieving a Bachelor of Arts degree does not simply encompass a few writing courses, but rather, speaks to the student's education as a whole. A student who has earned a Bachelor of Arts in English will have taken other courses in addition to literature courses, for example, languages, biology, philosophy, history, etc. So whether a student is studying science, art, or mathematics, a university's goal of higher education is to teach him or her about not just one field, but about an entire philosophy of thinking based on a broad course of study (Heartly and Saltmarsh).

Although education itself is not a "product" to be bought and sold, an educational program might be. Putting together an educational

program involves an understanding of the topic which requires in-depth academic work and research. Each educational program is unique to its institution and that is what gives each institution the right to offer it like a product. This being the case, universities and students alike need to protect themselves from being taken advantage of since money is involved in the equation. Thus, when offering their education programs, colleges and universities need to think like businesses and clearly define the expectations and costs of their academic programs. Defining the programs will make it easier for the recipient, the student, to understand what is being offered and how much it will cost total. But universities do have the right to design and offer their particular educational program however they want; just as any business has the right to design the products they offer. For example, Delta Airlines is free to offer whatever flights it wants. McDonald's is free to sell whatever types of sandwiches it wants. Apple is free to make whatever types of computers it wants.

A university is free to offer whatever programs it wants. Unfortunately, students today are attempting to demand changes in the university programs they are enrolled in based on consumerist expectations (Delucchi and Korgen). But a student cannot claim the right to change a product they have already bought. In other words a student does not have the right to purchase into an educational program as it is offered, and then afterwards insist that the university change what they have offered. This would be like a customer asking Apple to change a computer they bought because they want it to serve a different purpose than what it was made for. Now, customers can give Apple feedback. They can suggest changes to a product before it is put in the market, but Apple as the creator is the one who has to make the final decision to change or not change their product line.

In the same way, once students have enrolled in an institution they cannot ask for alterations to their program to suit their individual needs because enrolling in their courses was an act of agreeing to the university's existing policies and procedures (*The Business Journals*). Because of this, it is very important that colleges and universities clearly explain their product and its full cost upfront (Nemko). This is not only considerate of the significant amount of time, effort, and money that college students invest in their education, but it also prevents problems from occurring later on. Institutions of higher learning have an obligation to fully disclose both what students get for their investment (a well-rounded liberal arts educa-

tion, for example, which will include a specified number of classes outside the focus of their major) and what it will cost them (hours of class time and expected hours of work outside of class). Honesty therefore proves to be the best policy. All universities and colleges are responsible for representing themselves and their goals and costs fairly—this benefits both the institution and the student.

The responsibility of students then is to decide for themselves what they see as valuable for them as individuals (Nemko). Before seeking higher education, students need to fully understand what they want out of it. If a student is interested in education for education's sake, then a college or university degree is probably the right choice. Entrance into a university or college is an opportunity to learn, and to obtain a degree that affirms learned concepts. But since this does not translate perfectly into the work force, students are becoming confused about the purpose of a degree (Cain, Romanelli & Smith). If students are only interested in how higher education will help them gain bread-earning employment in the work force, their decision should probably be to enter a vocational school or perhaps even a for-profit university operating for that purpose (Ruch). While most higher education institutions have some interest in the commercial value of their degrees, commercial value is only one of the considerations for universities (Porter). Others include critical thinking, a sense of community, and increased cultural as well as specialized knowledge.

A for-profit university's mission statement looks quite different from a traditional university's mission statement. For example, one of the most well known for-profit universities today is the University of Phoenix, based in Arizona. Their mission statement reads as follows: "University of Phoenix provides access to higher education opportunities that enable students to develop knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their professional goals, improve the productivity of their organizations and provide leadership and service to their communities" (University of Phoenix). Contrasted with the University of Memphis's statement above we see several differences. Memphis says "pursuing new knowledge" while Phoenix says "achieve their professional goals" which shows the difference between a research-based institution and a for-profit institution. The University of Memphis also focuses on pursuing new knowledge "through research, artistic expression, and interdisciplinary and engaged scholarship" while Phoenix focuses on improving "the productivity of their

organizations" and providing "leadership and service to their communities." These statements show the differences in each institution's goals.

So a student only interested in how to enter the job market may do better at a university that is designed to prepare them with a degree which translates easily into the working world. Whatever students consider a wise investment of time and money, and whatever students consider to have the most valuable return, it is their responsibly to know what they are looking for, and to be fully aware of what higher education institutions are offering them. Life in the twenty-first century is complicated, moves fast, and from many reports, leaves people feeling more isolated (Frey and Stutzer). Coming to grips with life's big questions and being able to create a life that fits individuals with different talents and inclinations is just as important as earning a living (Frey and Stutzer).

An article from 2012 reports a case in which former law students sued several law schools. The students claimed the university was guilty of the "misleading use of salary and employment data," (*The Business Journals*). Robert B. Smith, an education attorney for the national law firm LeClairRyan, was interviewed about the issue. Smith had a very anti-consumer stance on the subject. He stated that consumer protection suits cannot even be applied to education because a "consumerist paradigm" (that is, a consumerist mentality and way of doing things) cannot coexist with education. When asked for his reasoning Smith said:

> Why? Because the consumerist paradigm does not fit higher education. Just as law degrees should not come with guarantees of 'gainful employment or your money back,' law students should not regard themselves as consumers entitled to the same. After all, they are individuals with varying degrees of talent, motivation, discipline and intelligence. Their futures are their own responsibilities. (*The Business Journals*).

Elayne Clift is a college professor who wrote about another case in which she was involved personally. In one of her graduate classes, students argued for the right to change a class curriculum by verbal protests and passive aggression. In her article titled, "From Students, a Misplaced Sense of Entitlement," she writes about her class's appalling attitude and even anger when she maintained a teacher's right to determine her class's depth level. The graduate students complained on the first day of the semester that her coursework was too difficult. When she explained to her students that she had not changed the coursework, but that it was "premised on previous syllabi for the same course at the same institution," her students continued to protest (Clift). They complained in class, dis-

played resentful behaviors, and some registered complaints online which caught the attention of Clift's administrators. Eventually quite a few of the students dropped out of the class. Many of those who stayed continued to exhibit aggressive behaviors. Ms. Clift attributes the student's inappropriate demands to an entitlement mentality students have acquired that makes them see themselves as consumers.

A decrease in academic performance is slowly beginning to show up as a side effect of the consumerist view in more than Ms. Clift's classroom. In 2012, the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* published an article on the subject. The article speaks about how pressures, both personal and societal, escalate to a consumerist attitude about college education. "Grade inflation, student incivility, altered classroom practices, and decreased faculty morale are all potential aftereffects of teaching students who hold academic entitlement beliefs" (Cain, Romanelli, and Smith). A consumer-minded student will see his or her goal as passing classes to earn credits, to finish course work, to complete his or her major, to graduate school, to get a job. Students will expect to be catered to instead of taking the responsibility of learning upon themselves (Cain, Romanelli, and Smith). Studies increasingly indicate that there are more students attending college "to make money" than there are students attending "to gain a well-rounded education and to formulate their values and goals," (Delucchi and Korgen).

The student acting as a consumer in a traditional university setting needs to be addressed and changed. Our students have the responsibility to determine what they are looking for before enrolling in a higher education institution. To help students and help themselves, colleges and universities need to clearly define their goals and purposes to their American, consumer-minded nation. The option of a vocational institution like the University of Phoenix is an alternative for practically-minded employed students looking for education that is designed specifically to get them a promotion or to improve job-related skills. It is imperative that traditional universities and colleges make their purposes and goals crystal clear to prospective students. It is not the universities' job to babysit students through college and ensure that they earn their diploma. Successful completion of college depends completely on the attitude, talent and perseverance of the student. But today's consumerist ideology has propelled students into a fast-paced run to check college off their to-do list.

Institutions of higher education of all types need to defend their right to offer an education program ranging from a humanities-based undergraduate experience to a more professionalizing or vocational education.

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