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The Selling Out of the American Dream: Student Rights!

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The American dream of a college degree and success has lured thousands of young men and young women to enroll in college. It is a dream of being able to pay one's bills, buy a home, and raise a family. But, in recent years, the dream has all but vanished for the students of useless and/or meaningless degree programs.

How many college teachers do you know? Do you think of them as people you can trust? How many have convinced you that they work on behalf of their students? How many students do you know who are living the American dream? Do they have an undergraduate degree or a graduate degree? Unfortunately, answers to these questions are linked to what has become the selling out of students! Parents are greatly disappointed because they believed in the American Dream. The question is this: Do the college teachers care? One would want to think that they care. After all, the profession of teaching is thought to be all about caring for students and helping them to realize their dreams.

What if I said to you that college teachers are not all that different from certain Wall Street personalities who play unethical games with the money of people they are responsible for helping? Hard to believe, isn't it? No one would think that college teachers work primarily for themselves, whether it is for money, greed, or promotion. Strangely enough, what they do is not that much different from what many college teachers do. Day after day, college teachers think about what they should do to ensure their position, status, and/or tenure? Sure, they understand that teaching is important. But, frankly, good teaching has been pushed aside to ensure sufficient time to do the

things necessary to get promoted and/or tenured. Frankly, from my 40 years of college teaching, it is clear that “anyone” can teach. That is why so few teachers actually take pride in being called a teacher. They would rather be a researcher or an administrator.

Do you think if 50% of all college teacher stopped thinking and “living” research that the academic institutions would shut down? No. Of course not since the number of published papers throughout the world is so large that under no circumstances is it possible either to run out of papers to read or to read even more than a small percent. In fact, it is impossible to read all the research papers across the variety of disciplines and professions. Hence, why is there such an emphasis on research? The answer is rather simple. The administrators spend so little time reflecting on how to effectively promote an assistant professor to an associate professor that they need the help of traditional thinking. That is, if you publish “x” research articles, then, we (the administrators) will give designated faculty members the right to promote you. The problem is the Deans and Vice-Presidents have not thought that much about the ethical dimensions of the promotion process for several hundred years.

The lack of a balance in valuing quality versus yet another research publication is problematic for many reasons. In particular, it has resulted decades of very little serious emphasis and/or concerns about teaching students how to think versus what to think. It is so bad that it is likely that the majority of the college teachers have not take the time to identify what it means to teach well (including the important responsibility of holding students accountable to learning what is require of them), or why teaching is so critical to the students’ success after college. In fact, semester after semester and decade after decade, the academic exercise physiologists have not stopped to consider the meaning of the following statement taken from an academic university department website:

The Department of Exercise Science offers the Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in Exercise Science. The degree is designed to prepare students for entry into a wide range of health-related post-baccalaureate graduate and professional programs.

-- <http://www.sph.sc.edu/exsc/undergrad.htm>

In others, the Department and its faculty and the administrators are all in agreement and support of their collective work that has zero to do with helping students transition into the public sector as employees of a credible healthcare job! The BS degree in exercise science is therefore a useless degree. Why, the American dream of getting a college degree is intimately connected to the students' preparation, hope, and expectation of being successful after graduation. But, the degree must be meaningful and purpose driven for that to happen. If it is not, then, the degree is useless and as such, then, the academic department and, ultimately, the academic institution itself. The quest is not just to be educated (however important), but to be positioned in such a way to help with acquiring a credible job. Hence, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that success is intimately tied to an academic degree that fulfills a purpose in society.

The degree program and the department of which the faculty are employed cannot exist simply for the faculty. The bottom line is that the faculty work for the students in the sense that they should provide academic, guidance, and appropriate information to help students fulfill their dreams. Close your eyes for a moment and you find yourself in the world of academia where the college teachers believe it is all about them and their survival. It is as if they belong to some elite group that isn't responsible for doing the right thing for the right reason on behalf of the students. Yet, read another website statement about the department's exercise science major:

The exercise science program is designed to prepare students to enter graduate school in one of the disciplines related to exercise science or to enter a health care professional school.

-- <http://exercisesciences.byu.edu/AcademicProgramsCenters/Undergraduate/BSExerciseScience.aspx>

College teachers (and strangely enough, academic exercise physiologists) have come to think of the exercise science degree as a transition into a graduate program and a not a degree to access a credible healthcare job. Why? The answer is obvious: The degree program is so generic as to be meaningless. Also, the college teachers have come to believe that teaching is a secondary function, especially when it is so commonly passed

on to graduate assistants or those who have failed at doing research. This thinking is a problem that needs correcting and yet, that is not likely to happen for decades to come. College teachers with doctorate degrees need to wake up to their self-indoctrination and failure to: (a) upgrade the exercise science curriculum to a credible exercise physiology degree; (b) place emphasis on quality teaching; and (c) realize the importance of an academic degree that is career driven.

College teachers must open their eyes sooner rather than later to see the reality of their failed degree programs. I am disappointed in the continued talk, especially at the graduate level whereby graduates are involved in research but graduate knowing very little about how to find a credible job in the public sector. When was the last time you heard a college teacher present at regional or national meeting about teaching and how to become a better teacher or to help focus the degree program to empower their students? Instead, if we look for it, we will college teachers who are benefiting from their research at the expense of their students. As an example, consider the following content from yet another academic department website:

This non-vocational program in the Exercise and Sport Science major is dedicated to helping students better understand the disciplines within ESS, including pedagogy, kinesiology, biomechanics, exercise physiology, motor behavior and sport/exercise psychology. After completing the undergraduate program, students typically go on to a graduate program in ESS, Occupation Therapy, Physical Therapy, Nutrition, Physician's Assistant, etc.

-- <http://www.health.utah.edu/ess/undergraduate/Requirements/index.html>

There you have it. Exercise science is a non-vocational degree. Students who major in it must apply to graduate school because the degree program itself is not linked to a vocation! This thinking is as bad as exercise physiologists who refer to themselves as “physiologists” when they do not have a physiology degree. Clearly, there are distinct identifications of academic degrees. A person with a degree in accounting does not have the right to refer to him or herself as a social worker. A person with a physical therapy degree is not a nurse. This concept itself is rather basic, and it should be. So,

why do exercise physiologists refer to themselves as physiologist? Why are they part of the exercise science non-vocational degree program?

Physiology is not exercise physiology and exercise physiology is not physiology. Both are distinct academic degree programs. Similarly, it is inappropriate for the faculty of exercise science majors to encourage their students to think of themselves as exercise physiologists. To be an exercise physiologist, you need an academic degree in exercise physiology or you must pass the “exercise physiologist certification” exam to earn the title of exercise physiologist. Yet, in the “generic” departments of 40 or more similar degree titles, there are college teachers who are not interested in wasting their time talking to their students, so they say, “Yes, of course, you can call yourself an ‘exercise physiologist.’”

These exercise physiology faculty members have one thing in common and that is their success at the expense of straight thinking. Their quest is to achieve personal success, and they are willing to do whatever to ensure that it happens. Hence, dealing in confusion (especially in relation to academic degree terminology) and the misleading dogma that has gotten worse over the five or more decades, students continue to find themselves on the outside looking in. If it continues as I suspect it will for decades to come, the indifference in helping students live the American dream will eventually become evident to everyone. No one should have to pay tuition dollars in the range of \$30,000 to \$130,000 to find him- or herself unemployable or out of necessity apply to graduate school. Every person with a college degree should be in position to find a credible job with sustainable career opportunities.

It is likely that all exercise science students want to be successful, but how can they be with a meaningless degree. Also, the idea that everyone needs a graduate degree to be successful is problematic. It is dysfunctional thinking since it sets the stage for increased financial problems. Why not agree on one point, that is, the undergraduate degree should be useful in finding a credible job. Clearly, the divide between teaching and research is hurting students. Perhaps college teachers should stop thinking of themselves as researchers if such thinking is driven by greed and position that competes with teaching? Why not realize that we in academia have allowed the attitude of “What’s in it for me” to dominant our time? Isn’t it pastime that college teachers stop

putting themselves above their students? They work for the students who pay the college who then pays the teachers, right?

Our college administrators are also part of the problem. They, too, must stop thinking of the college degree as a product for purchase without being responsible for its quality. Vice-presidents, deans, and department chairs have put themselves above the students as if they have the divine right not to think beyond their big titles. They have meetings after meetings to target academic programs, including online degrees of which many are hurting the students' chances of success. It is as if they think they are above the real issue of producing academic degrees that position students in stable, financially sound jobs. It is time to correct the problem, and put the students' welfare first. Administrators must remind themselves why students go to college in the first place.

When students are in position to apply to a credible job, there is hope. With a real job, college graduates are not doomed to poverty. For now, however, it is predictable that the next generation of young men and women will continue to have problems in paying their tuition loans and all other financial matters that associate with independence after college. Hence, college teachers who fail to speak up are not helping their students. From the ASEP perspective, it is their responsibility more so than anyone else to show some backbone. College must develop academic degrees that are not simply transitional degrees to graduate programs.

Do students have a constitutional right? Specifically, with respect to the students' academic degree, has his or her rights been violated? Perhaps, it is one thing to say, "The student graduated without the ability to read" and, perhaps, altogether something else to say, "The department chair and faculty should be held liable for infringing on the student's rights and for negligence that caused emotional harm." That is, can college teachers be sued for providing an inadequate education?" I think so, especially since there are at least 40 academic degrees that have received little professional and educational analysis during the past 50 years. This point is especially relevant today.

If students cannot find a credible job after spending thousands of dollars in tuition and other fees, the degrees should be classified as failing the students. In fact, this was the impetus for the founding of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP).

The co-founders felt very strongly that the academic degree should be exercise physiology and not exercise science, and that the exercise physiology degree needed a strong professional infrastructure. Accountability is important, and students must be informed of the failures of the existing academic degrees that are not career-driven. That is why accountability for educational outcomes must become the new public policy of the 21st century. The time is right to go forward with new thinking so that the students of tomorrow will be forewarned.

Malpractice is holds professionals to accepted and required standards of care when working with clients, patients, and students. College teachers who embrace a failed system or who close a blind eye to an existing system of meaningless degree programs that result in emotional harm may very well be liable for malpractice in the future. That is, the failure to inform students and their parents that the exercise science seldom allow for the credible career opportunities that are afforded to students of other degree programs may form the basis for malpractice if the negligent delivery of the degree program is a legal cause for personal injury.

College teachers are members of a learned profession. They should know better than to waste students' money! College teachers, chairs, deans, and administrators have a duty to provide students with an adequate education for success in the public sector. If they fail to tell (or advise) the students appropriately from the beginning of entry into the department, then, they are simply "using" the students to keep the department afloat and/or to maintain their jobs. Either is inappropriate. Students have rights. They are paying for a product that is enmeshed in the college educational experience. The court may not want educational malpractice suits to proceed, but the reality is that it is just a matter of time. The ultimate consequence of students paying for a "product that is defective" must be based on a set of standards for degree programs.

While this thinking may come across as unnecessary as to higher institutions of academia, every institution of higher education should be held accountable for the success of their students both while they are in school and after they graduate. Academic institutions are partly responsible (but nonetheless responsible) for the students' opportunities to gain access to "gainful employment." Thus, the bottom line is this: Where are the department data regarding the students' gainful-employment?

Surely, the department chairs, faculty, and administrators are interested in the outcome of an academic program that costs thousands of dollars? The “debt-to-earnings annual rate denominator” argues that more time should be spent clarifying the obvious.

In more direct analysis, students are concerned about the return on their investment. Should they simply borrow whatever amount that necessary for a particular degree without consideration of the earning power? No. Yet, too often this is exactly the case. Unfortunately, too few individuals and/or agencies are interested in informing students and their families of the career opportunities versus the necessity to apply to graduate school in hopes of locating a credible career opportunity. The idea of success and a “return on investment” of students with a degree in exercise science with a similar student who earned a bachelor’s degree in chemistry on the same campus is more often than not very disappointing. Shouldn’t the department be held responsible for the students’ investment in time and money in pursuit of a degree that may or may not have a market degree?

After all, most students choose an academic degree that is known to produce an excellent annual salary. Imagine, graduating to find yourself making \$12 an hour at Bob’s Gym with little to no healthcare benefits. Such an outcome is not gainful employment. Bluntly speaking, it is indicative of the failed exercise science rhetoric. There is good reason to worry. The problem is traditional thinking prevails along with the overall tendency to avoid thinking differently. Students graduate without the ability to tackle problems and deal with the reality of rising student debt. Clearly, it is obvious that earnings data should be used to identify credible academic degrees.

Two realities are apparent regardless of whether college teachers and administrators are willing to update their thinking. First, is paying for American higher education today simply a function of “any” major will do? That is, the idea of attending college is all that matters. Talking about the college degree and whether it is linked to a career appears to be of little interest to those who are responsible for the degree programs. If so, then, what happened to the idea that college was “the” means to which young men and women would be prepared for work in the real world. Colleges have been recognized for decades as the de facto system for work-force development.

The idea that “just any” degree program (because it is part of the college offering) cannot be considered as useless is wrong. Students (and their parents) need realistic and honest information from college advisors and teachers. They need realistic answers to three questions:

1. What is exercise science?
2. What are the credible career options available to the students?
3. What are the key benefits for students?

In other words, when students realize the degree is not going to provide them a credible career in the public sector, they are more likely to choose an entirely different degree to major in.

Most college graduates and their parents begin to face their financial reality of having paid thousands of dollars in tuition and living expenses just a few months after graduation. It is unfortunate that many wait too long to ask the question, “What are benefits of a college education versus not going to college?” Unemployment cannot be a benefit nor is employment in a low-paying job (such as the typical personal trainer or fitness director jobs). Neither satisfies the risk of failing to pay monthly bills and, in an increasing percent of college graduates, their tuition debt is their pain in the neck for decades.

Postsecondary institutions that promote useless academic degrees set the stage for student failure. Academic administrators and the college teachers, who support these programs, either willfully or through their indifferences, are not helping college students. The students’ return on their financial investment, not to mention their time invested across four or more years, ultimately ends up a wash. That is why those responsible for academic degree programs at academic institutions must become responsible for informing students of the benefits or the lack of benefits of an academic degree programs. One way to do just that is to require each department chair to provide the dean and vice presidents with earnings by program a year after the senior class graduates. The college must be held responsible for publishing the same information in the local, regional, and national newspapers and/or other means to informing parents and potential students of useless degree programs.

Parents and students are missing information about credible career opportunities per degree program. They are missing information about salaries, and whether the job is transitional or one that the graduate would expect to plant roots and buy a home and raise a family. If college graduates are going to be able to compete in today's economy, they need specific financial information to help them prepare for their success. They need data about the availability of jobs in their local area versus specific regions of the United States. They need to know whether it will be necessary to move thousands of mile away from home to locate a job. If so, what does that mean to a family who is interested in living close to each other?

The student-loan debt has exceeded the sum of \$1-trillion and climbing. Yes, it is true that this amount is partly the result of an increase in enrollment. But, it is also my understanding that the total volume of education loans disbursed doubled from \$55.7 billion in 2001 dollars to \$113.4 billion between 2001-02 and 2011-12. It is no wonder that college affordability is a serious problem. Yes, it true that many students receive grant aid and tax benefits and, therefore, not all the students pay the entire sticker price for a college degree. Nonetheless, many parents are worried about paying the bills for their college students. Many parents and families are struggling to make it in today's financial market. Remember, it is said that 21 million people in America cannot find a job. This is news and yet, it is not news at all that, perhaps, to some extent and no one knows for sure what that percent is of the millions of non-employed have useless college degrees! Academic departments that continue to accept students even when the degree programs have poor records of placing their graduates in jobs should be held accountable, especially when the results are tragic.