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Opinion

Let's Not Forget the Students

By Thomas Patrick Melady

AS A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT, I sense a serious danger in higher education today. We administrators are failing to measure up to our responsibilities because in our well-meaning but time-consuming efforts to achieve fiscal stability, we are losing sight of the human equation in the university experience. We are failing to spend the time to nurture meaningful relationships with students. This strikes at the heart of our responsibilities, and I believe that this problem merits our immediate attention.

People need people. In all the strident rhetoric I read in the newspapers, the educational journals, the prestigious foundation reports, I see very little attention being paid to the primary responsibility of educators—the student. Somehow, amid the balance sheets and the frantic jinkets to state capitals and to Washington seeking financial assistance, the student got lost in the shuffle.

As the pressures mount in the coming decade, I believe the real danger to higher education is depersonalization. A serious concern is that presidents and deans will turn themselves into vague shadows on our campuses, into tarnished bureaucrats with no time in their hectic schedules to meet with students. And I am not talking about just "availability" here. I mean we need to make time to develop deep personal friendships that will remain steadfast beyond the four short years of a university education.

Before it is too late, I think we need to ask ourselves this question: What is happening to the dream we once cherished about higher education? That we could receive young people at the critical age of young adulthood and play a major role in their maturation, in developing their cultural and intellectual curiosity, in helping them acquire a healthy sense of values? What happened to our role as counselors, as guides on the path to the good life?

Time. A simple four-letter word. I hear it constantly in the halls and board rooms of academe. Nobody has any time. Our lives accelerate at such a frenetic pace, we have no time even to say hello and goodbye. We rush hither and thither, and



ILLUSTRATION FOR THE CHRONICLE BY AMELIA BELLOW

we don't even know one another. And when we reach that point, when we finally come face to face with the stranger who is supposed to be our friend, then we no longer can claim to call ourselves a community. When that time comes—and it is almost here—we have lost an integral part of the vision of higher education.

I beg presidents, deans, and faculty members to refuse adamantly to become part of this growing cancer of depersonalization. The students are ready for us. In this era of compromised values, where we see everywhere the results of the breakdown of traditional structures, where we witness on a grand scale the impact of our highly mechanistic society with its lack of leadership and its sense of fear and alien-

ation, our students are saying: "We need your guidance, we need you; we need someone who cares."

IN SPITE OF THE MOUNTING PRESSURES we administrators face, we must recognize once and for all that students are our highest priority. As our time becomes increasingly scarce, we must stop ourselves, stand back to gain some perspective, recognize our shortcomings; and then we must engage ourselves in the herculean effort to wrench more time from our overcrowded schedules, and spend it well with our students.

Currently, everyone talks *ad infinitum* about the financial woes and connected problems of declining enrollments and ris-

ing costs besetting institutions of higher education. I suggest that one sure-fire way to institutional health is to place more emphasis on the human equation on campus. More specifically, I suggest that administrators must:

► Avoid the stagnation of bureaucracy. We must insist that the university administrative structure be personalized.

► Teach in the classroom, personifying what the university stands for. I have always taught a course each semester and find it a most rewarding experience.

► Shed the image of the distant business executive or the shallow glad-hander, and instead become deeply involved in the intellectual and cultural life of the university. A president is neither external nor internal; he is the head of an intellectual community, and he must be close to its members.

► Set the tonal quality of interpersonal relationships on campus as part of their leadership responsibility. I have insisted that the invitations from students to be present at their activities receive a top priority on my calendar.

In summary, we administrators must recognize that while we may balance our budget sheets, while we may attract lucrative grants from Washington, we may at the same time be guilty of cutting the very heart out of the university. Time, we all know, is our most elusive commodity, yet we must accept the challenge to create structures that allow for administrators and faculty members—each in his own style—to spend more time with students. Universities are not factories; students are not employees.

Somehow, in all our frenzied efforts to survive, we began to lose sight of the human dimension in higher education. Now we must work to rediscover that unique dimension.

We need to show our students we care. This is a primary responsibility of university presidents, and we must send forth the message: Our students are our, first concern.

Thomas Patrick Melady is president of Sacred Heart University. This article is reprinted by permission of the *New York Times*. © 1980 the *New York Times*.

One Parent's Hopes for His Daughter's Education

By Richard W. Lassegard

THE last of our four kids left home this fall for college. She is missed, of course, but there are compensations—the car when I want it, for instance, the bathroom when I need it.

I have five hopes for Sandi during her college career, five bargains for our \$20,000 expenditure:

► A cheerful understanding of the weaknesses in formal education and its practitioners. She should not take college too seriously. I want her to laugh more often than she cries—and professors will give her plenty of reason to do both over the next four years.

► Acceptance of herself. Youth is a time of both joyful highs and miserable lows—

mental disturbance is common; suicide is second only to accidents as the cause of death; escape into drugs is a cop-out. I want Sandi to learn to say with conviction: "I like myself as a Lassegard, as a woman, as a human being."

► A friendship with at least one faculty member (maybe two). Physical education or philosophy, art or accounting—I am indifferent as to the academic discipline, but I want her "turned on" by a mature mind. She needs to know the youthful thrill of worshipful adoration at the feet of a master teacher. That human feet are clay she will discover soon enough. Let her be, I pray, a late bloomer when it comes to cynicism, a zealous disciple, a Plato before a Socrates.

► A few close classmates—more than one, but not many more. Disdaining popularity, she can avoid skimming the surface of human relationships. Student-body president, Who's Who on Campus, homecoming queen—let those cups of Coke pass by her lips in favor of a goblet brimming with the wine of friendship. With friends she loves (and I shall be disappointed if they are only other middle-class WASP's) she can share her successes and failures, her dreams and aspirations, and the experimental application of new ideas without fear of misunderstanding, rejection, or ridicule.

► The ability, honed by four years of practice, to think sharply and incisively. That means, I sincerely believe, that Sandi

must learn to write—the tangible indication of an orderly and creative mind.

Take her. She's yours. And if you, as college teachers, can make these dreams come true for a Sandi or an Andy, you will have earned my admiration and the appreciation of every other hopeful parent. Then may you be blessed with eternal tenure. May your salary increase, your committee assignments decrease, and your supply fund run over, undetected.

And may your retirement indefinitely be delayed.

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