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When institutions of higher ed fail

Dr. Aldemaro
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Letters from Academia

Some may think that the only sign of a college or university failing is when it closes. And that has certainly happened to some small, private colleges that have gone bankrupt in the last few years. Yet, failure has many faces and comes in many degrees.

We can say that colleges and universities fail when the quality of education they offer is not rigorous, regardless of what some regulatory agencies might say. Or when they promise to prepare students for jobs that no longer exist. Luring new students based on rankings, amenities, and other forms of non-academic qualities is another form of failure, as is when they fail to protect students from the many dangers of early adult life away from home.

These types of failures are rarely reported as such by the national media, not even by the standard publication on the trade, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Their consequences are neither as scandalous nor as evident before the public eye. Yet, these institutional failures are starting to make a dent in the talent pool at many of these institutions, with an increasing number of people leaving due to disillusionment with the whole enterprise.

We need to start defining failure of institutions of higher education as the loss of control over the governing mechanisms of those institutions. And that kind of failure happens at many levels, from the upper leadership and administration all the way to the faculty. The latter may be surprising to some, but apathy and lack of understanding by the faculty on how colleg-

es and universities operate are factors leading to some institutional failures, and that is why we need for more and better participation of faculty in the governance of these institutions.

At the upper leadership level, many managers and administrators are ill prepared to deal with management and leadership issues. This is largely due to the fact that most leaders come from the faculty and are not trained in dealing with those issues. By the same token, we must say that many leaders chosen from outside academia are also ill prepared to understand the very nature of higher education and, therefore, fail to adapt to their new environments.

This is not surprising, given that faculty members very rarely, if ever, show interest toward gaining training in university administration, particularly at the early stages of their careers where they are so preoccupied in launching their scholarship and sharpening their teaching abilities in order to attain tenure. The same can be said about teaching. Despite the fact that most college students working on getting a terminal degree are expected to teach, they are rarely trained in pedagogy. What they learn is through personal experience and practice by intuition. Faculty tend to teach based on observing others, most of whom do not do a great job or who are just

repeating incorrect approaches or policies that they have observed for many years during their own academic experience.

Managers, in general, also have very little preparation for leadership. According to some studies, between one half and three quarters of all managers in the U.S. do not have the skills required by their jobs. In academia, the vast majority of department chairs and other mid-level administrators have no prior administrative experience or training. That is particularly true when it comes to leadership issues.

It's no wonder that instead of understanding or appropriately managing these issues, many administrators come up with illusory solutions based on fads. One of the current fads in higher education – promoted by both politicians and university administrators with a superficial view of the world – is that all we need are more graduates with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) degrees. Yet, what we really need are graduates with skills that are useful no matter a student's major or career plan.

What Americans are demanding are more people with skills in communication (verbal and written), problem solving abilities and creative and critical thinking. What they are saying is that we need to produce more well-rounded individuals. Americans think that experiential learning, meaning more hands-on education, is extremely important. After all, what you learn by memorizing you tend to forget, while what you learn by doing you tend to

remember. That is why surveys show a declining confidence in online education, which delivers mostly content but not, necessarily, skills.

We need to create better ways to assess how well we are doing our jobs at all levels, not only from how well we train students, but also how effective we are when it comes to the way we manage our resources, both financial or human. In the present time when the image of higher education is deteriorating, we need to show our care for good management. That may sound antithetical to the old notion of the ivory tower and to the splendid isolation in which academics have lived for centuries. But we have to stop demeaning administrative work.

When it becomes almost impossible for deans to find faculty willing to chair a department – even on a temporary basis – that is a sign of institutional failure at the most basic level.

Professors need to start taking on administrative responsibility, or the whole concept of share governance will go down the drain. That may mean less time for scholarly work, but at the end of the day we all have to feel responsible for our institutions. The alternative may be too frightening to consider: The running of our colleges and universities will be left to those who have little understanding of what higher education is all about.

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