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Higher education has had better years

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Higher education has had better years

Dr. Aldemaro
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Letters from Academia

which linked both freedom of speech and rightwing activities, was the concerted (and well-funded) effort to bring to multiple campuses people with extremist views in order to provoke uncivil responses and attract press coverage. Unfortunately, many campus administrators fell into the trap by not responding adequately to those situations, and higher education continued to receive bad press, with campuses often portrayed as liberal, intolerant places — just what the conservative movement wanted.

With the confirmation of Betsy DeVos as education secretary, we saw many of the regulations on for-profit colleges being lifted despite the fact that those institutions are the major source of student debt in the country. Relaxed rules will allow many predatory “colleges” to continue to receive federal dollars while using deceptive practices to attract students to enroll in programs that provide students substandard educations and scant chance of actually graduating and getting a good job. Also, under DeVos, regulations to make all colleges and universities more accountable when it comes to cases of sexual harassment have also been undermined.

Colleges and universities were also impacted by new immigration policies, which not only restricted international students from certain countries to come to the U.S., but also created the image that we as a nation do not welcome

students from abroad. The result has been a decrease (for the first time since the terrorist attacks of 9/11) of international students at U.S. institutions. These students were helping make up, in part, for a decrease in revenue at colleges and universities brought about by a national decline in U.S. student enrollment. There are fewer American-born students who are of age to graduate from high school, which has led to financial problems at many institutions. International students were, prior to new anti-immigration policies, helping make up some of the loss.

Then came the GOP tax plan. The initial version, which did not make it to the final bill, contained provisions such as eliminating exemptions for the cost of tuition, something many students desperately need to sustain themselves and their families. The final version taxed many private college endowments, used mostly to provide scholarships to students. An example of how absurd that is is the case of Berea College in Kentucky. This is a private college that is tuition-free, benefitting poor students, most of them minorities. Now the college’s ability to keep supporting them has been reduced.

Regarding minority groups, we also saw how some colleges got a lot of heat by implementing inclusive policies such as bathroom access for transgender students, as was the case of Spelman College (a historically black, women’s college in Atlanta), which was showered with criticism for accepting transgender students.

Are there any lessons we can learn from 2017? This is a question for college leaders to reflect on. Their jobs can no longer be confined to being cer-

emonial figures or to attending sports events. They need to take a more leadership role when defending the values of higher education, and to come forward when threats appear on the horizon or when they materialize. After all, the buck should stop with them.

This call may prove a tall order for many. Many leaders of public colleges and universities know that they work at the pleasure of the political structures of their state, so if they criticize the legislature or their governors for lack of funding or for coming up with policies that undermine the good work done at those institutions, they may lose their jobs on a whim.

Leaders of both public and private institutions can also become the target of donors who do not want their money supporting institutions involved in activist causes, no matter how good or just they are.

Whether we like it or not, what is happening in this and other countries is part of a concerted and well-funded attack on intellectualism, freedom of expression and inquiry, and science-based decisions. In other words, it’s an attack on liberty itself. We are at risk of going back into the Middle Ages when a few powerful individuals regulated human spirit and behavior was guided by the worst of our impulses. Just read the news if you have any doubts.

Happy New Year.

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We are all familiar with the maladies that have affected higher education over the past few years: budget cuts, enrollment declines, bad press, etc. But was there anything that made things particularly worse in 2017? Plenty.

The bad news started with reports of increasing censorship and intimidation exercised upon college newspapers. We saw it happening on the campuses of Mt. Saint Mary’s University in Maryland, Northern Michigan University and Wesleyan University in Connecticut. The University of Kentucky’s campus newspaper was sued by the university, and at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, three staff members on “The Justice,” the student newspaper, were notified that they would be called to a university meeting, the first step in a disciplinary process, because the newspaper had audiotaped a public rally in 2015 at which students criticized the university’s handling of sexual assault cases.

The next round of bad news happened on August 11 and 12 when rightwing groups marched at Charlottesville, the hometown of the University of Virginia. Emboldened by the results of the 2016 presidential elections, groups of neo-Nazis, white supremacists and the like staged big demonstrations following the Nazi playbook in order to call attention to themselves and give the impression that the movement is bigger and more powerful than what it actually is. The result? One innocent person dead and the prestige of the university and the town police force damaged because of the way they handled the whole situation. The chief of police of Charlottesville resigned in December.

Another issue that erupted this year,