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Student Retention: A Reply to Frank Daley
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Frank Daley begins with the claim that education is more important than health, war and the economy. I suppose that in some sense he may be right. Absent education—understood broadly as the transmission of the information necessary to prolong our civilization—coming generations will not be able to communicate, cook dinner, tie their shoe-laces or, for that matter, cobble shoes and create laces. Professor Daley, however, seems to mean something more specific. He is interested in college and university education. That is more problematic.

Let's remember that the massive social commitment to education has been in place for barely a century and a half, and that the expansion of postsecondary education as a major social project is quite barely a half century old.

Growing up in Ontario in the 1950s, I was aware of only a few universities (mainly the University of Toronto, Queen's University and the University of Western Ontario), and they discouraged large enrolments, especially of high school graduates from the lower-middle and working classes. As for community colleges, they were not even twinkles in the eyes of senior bureaucrats. So, while official education in the province now boasts something close to two dozen universities and an equal number of colleges, with full-time and part-time enrolments in the hundreds of thousands each, we must remember that this vast expansion is of recent origin. We must also remember that it is a "business," or at least its senior administrators treat it as such. Students are regarded as customers when they enroll and products when they graduate. The corporate agenda defines curriculum and institutional assessment. In the world of "K-Mart Kollege," almost no one (except Frank Daley and his noble colleagues) genuinely cares about the proper education and training of students. Such success is not easily quantifiable and quality is badly measured on the "Key Performance Indicators" that are used to judge institutional success according to the business model, the commodification of education and the fetishism of the "bottom line."

When thinking about student retention, it is possible to focus on the individual student. This is something that Professor Daley does splendidly in his work with students. I have seen him in action and can attest to his energy and skill. He and his colleagues really do help students to change their own lives, to become focused, attentive and thoughtful in their efforts to define and achieve meaningful goals. I do not discredit him in any way for his caring and critical attention to student needs.

Instead I wish to offer a complementary set of concerns. In addition to looking at the individual student and risking the problem of taking the nature of college programs and the designated role of official education in the perpetuation of the fundamental structures of social reproduction and control, it is important to see education in a larger context. While it is important for students to reform themselves, there is at least as much to be done in interrogating and redesigning the society to which they are being asked to adapt and into which they are expected to integrate.

Our current inventory of postsecondary institutions, we must remember, did not arise because someone got it in their heads that all citizens should suddenly become highly skilled producers, discriminating consumers and intellectually enlightened, socially aware citizens. Rather, the investment in higher education was prompted by at least the dim realization that the industrial revolution, which begat compulsory primary and some secondary education, was on the cusp of a new transformation—call it the postindustrial, cybernetic,

high-tech or information society as you will.

This much was explicitly recognized: factors such as technological change, the “human resource” demands of a corporate economy and the increasing expectation of popular governance were deeply implicated in the growth of education—and a little paranoia arising from the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik just over fifty years ago didn’t hurt either.

I raise these issues not to discount the idealism that inspires authentic educators in colleges and universities, but only to caution us against thinking that the place of colleges in society should be contingent upon what is deemed necessary to the existing power structure alone. Early modern universities did not concentrate in the “classics” for nothing; the training of priests, lawyers and diplomats was essential, while having peasants with brains as well as brawn could become dangerous. Likewise, it was necessary to teach industrial workers to read work orders and turn dials on machines to the correct number if the factory was to run smoothly. So it is today: with the exception of small oases of poesy and tolerable dissent, the main job of colleges may be to chill expectations while simultaneously encouraging social conformity.

After all, we once imagined that additional education would ensure individual success—a well-paid, inherently fulfilling job and a favoured place in society. Instead, although we have piled oodles of certificates, diplomas and degrees upon generations of young people, we must admit that the income of all but the very wealthiest of our citizens has essentially flat-lined since about 1970. What’s more, setting aside the current economic problems, it is safe to say that employment is not entirely commensurate with educational achievement (or at least paper qualifications) and, besides, it’s not all that easy to find a reliable plumber or carpenter anymore.

When we add to this the almost mind-boggling array of serious problems we face in our colleges, our communities and our civilization, it is required of us to think deeply about our responsibilities in connecting our classrooms to larger concerns. Start anywhere: a fragile and fundamentally flawed economy, political corruption, unmodified ecological degradation, unrestrained population growth, technology out of control. Add in enough ethical dilemmas to keep moral philosophers at work for centuries while the rest of us try to muddle through everything from the morality of postmodern medicine to the pressure for students to cheat on exams, and you have some pretty serious issues that cannot be finessed forever. As Stein’s Law says: “If something can’t go on forever, it will stop.” Our current social arrangements and the direction of our culture cannot be sustained forever. They are self-destructive and they will stop. The question, then, is: “How?” Will we transform ourselves into something more sane, more modest and ultimately healthier? Or will we pursue a narcissistic collapse, with no one caring much if we end with a whimper or a bang?

Frank Daley has bitten off and has successfully chewed a large part of the duties of teachers toward their students. I am no fan of Socrates (whose “noble lie” anticipated Goebbels by about 2,500 years but was no less ignominious), but the old fellow was certainly on to something when he said: “Know thyself.”

There is another large chunk, however, and that is the necessity to know your society. Fitting in and succeeding in a political economy that is as systematically alienating, unjust and inhumane in its treatment of people locally and globally, and that seems committed to suicide by environmental destruction as ours needs young people who display not only self-knowledge, but also a commitment to improve their society fundamentally.

Otherwise, as educators, we will be scurrying about helping the last of the passengers up the gangplank. The *Titanic* is about to sail, and we wouldn’t want anyone to miss the boat.

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