

In education, enthusiasm matters

During the economic crisis of the 1930s, two prominent institutions of higher learning introduced programs of study designed to prepare students for lives in a grim world. Neither institution used pre-professional courses, accountability measures, standardized testing or statistics about student earning outcomes. The University of Chicago introduced its great books program and, later, a sequence of courses in the humanities and the social, physical and natural sciences. The University of Texas started its Plan II program of rigorous courses in literature, philosophy, society, arts, mathematics and natural sciences.

Since 2004, I have traveled yearly as a national lecturer for the Phi Beta Kappa Society, our nation's oldest and most prestigious college honor society. Since 1776, membership in PBK has been one of the highest honors that can be conferred on undergraduate liberal arts and science students.

In the past 25 years, however, as American undergraduate education has emphasized more and more pre-professional "career-credentialing," students at about 100 institutions with PBK chapters fail to appreciate what becoming a member signifies for them and for our country. A survey identified as one reason for their attitudes: "low prestige for academic achievement at the institution." What else do we expect when we promote career training, starting salaries and self-interest over cultivation of the mind, creativity and civic virtues?

The society's aim has stayed the same since 1779: to bring together the best minds across academic disciplines so they can communicate without reserve on matters of speculation with that freedom of enquiry which ever dispels the clouds of falsehood by the radiant sunshine of truth. Nowadays, such aims might seem old-fashioned or dangerously liberal.

In our nation, states, cities and towns, education, from pre-school through Ph.D., is influenced by special interest groups. These include zealots who put creationism on the same level that biological studies have reached in 130 years of research since Charles Darwin; visionaries who pay students for grades; and elected officials who hold schools, teachers and students accountable by evaluating majors according to the salaries earned by their graduates and who distort education into a quantifiable process of dispensing and acquiring rote knowledge.



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In 20 years of guest-teaching in elementary and secondary schools, I have not met one teacher or administrator who thinks devoting precious classroom time to preparation for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills is helpful in educating their students. When the results are used to assign ratings to schools that will make or break their funding, the outcome is even worse. More time is lost in prepping students and, as The Dallas Morning News reported in June 2007, in Texas alone, "tens of thousands of students cheat on the TAKS test every year, including thousands on the high-stakes graduation test." Then there are the documented cases of schools and school districts themselves cheating to survive in the funding contest.

My own travels and talks for PBK have persuaded me all is not lost. First, PBK is not about politics. PBK chapters are places where scholars and students with different political outlooks come together and express ideas openly. I have been there and done that.

Second, professors who are devoted to PBK are active all across the country. They teach their students with contagious enthusiasm, as I have seen firsthand at the University of Arkansas, Eastern Illinois University and Jacksonville State University in Alabama, and at smaller jewels like Hendrix College in Arkansas, Gustavus Adolphus and St. Olaf in Minnesota, and Roanoke College in Virginia.

We don't need more evaluation standards, standardized tests, unreadable reports, cash bribes for students or politically calculated ideas from highly partisan government committees. Let's get out of the way of teachers at all levels who believe what Phi Beta Kappa stands for: "Love of learning will captain the ships of our lives." Their students will do the rest. All of our boats will rise.

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