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Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education

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Excellence Without A Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education.

Harry R. Lewis; (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2006).

Reviewed by Rebecca A. Owen

In the midst of the demands of competing stakeholders, the mission of American higher education has been blurred, confused and redirected. Ivy League schools in all their prestige are no exception, including Harvard, home of Harry R. Lewis, faculty member and former dean. In *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*, Lewis shares his perspective as a faculty member and top level administrator through his thesis that higher education, essentially led by Harvard's example, has lost its sense of identity. Educational institutions are no longer held together by a common mission. They allow competition and consumerism to drive their direction. Such a flimsy state of educational leadership has proven disastrous in the face of challenge and struggle.

To situate his position, Lewis highlights how competition and consumerism have infiltrated the core curriculum. He shows this through assessing the following aspects of the institution: teaching, grading, personal responsibility, and money & students. In the course of serving the consumerism of students, parents, employers and/or the institution itself, each area has fallen from its initially focused purpose of ensuring the development of the undergraduate. Lewis (2006) worries that "Today's consumer culture, in which the college's job is to make its students happy rather than to educate them, threatens the old idea that the disciplinary system should make students into better people" (p. 161). Instead, this cultural perception has shifted systems in the process of higher education to function within parameters of advancement, security and reputation. This movement leaves character development, essential to any career, by the wayside. Naturally, the terrain of the university is lacking when any one area is given more or less attention than is due. This void of character development and other oversights have left institutions lopsided, making for a slippery slope for other schools to follow in an attempt to compensate for, or surrender to, the trends.

Although Lewis writes from the head of secular education in America, his reflections are not strange to the private, religious sector. Faith-based institutions have not been immune to this slippery slope, compromising Christian values in light of a competitive market in education. As focus is dedicated to improving the academic quality to attract students whose primary goal is to stay afloat financially in a tough market, faith development has been understated and separated from the classroom. This core of undergraduate development cannot afford to be limited to a nominal appearance in a mission statement, but must be an integral component of managing people and administering programs both curricular and co-curricular, specifically in the current "tough market" of postmodernism and pluralism.

Throughout his critique of the four areas listed above, Lewis shows how consumerism has driven the mission of teaching from developing the worldview of a student to preparing him or her for a specific career. Lewis cuts through the perception that students simply graduate and get jobs for the rest of their lives. Students need to think

critically about engaging their world and society on a higher level as they navigate diverse careers in an ever-changing market. He rightly believes colleges are training societal trendsetters when he asks, “Will graduates know what to do with their lives, and how to take responsibility for the society they will inherit?” (p. 149). College students are in training to be leaders in their chosen fields of study and will need a philosophical foundation that will hold up through change and innovation. They will need a core understanding of themselves and the world to be effective stewards of their influence in scholarship and society, recognizing that “True freedom is not the freedom to do what one wishes without consequence, but a balance between choice and responsibility, between self and society” (p. 153). As highly educated individuals, American college students have a high calling and tall responsibility to their fellow world citizens.

This noble philosophy of teaching has been distracted by the consumerism of the American society, entitling everyone with an advanced degree to a well-paying job, not a well-rounded perspective. Lewis laments that “This superimposition of economic motivations on ivory-tower themes has exposed a university without a larger sense of educational purpose or a connection to its principal constituents” (pp. 2-3). The university is to “help students understand what it means to be human” (p. 3), and if getting a better paying job is the goal students are allowed to maintain and pursue through their undergraduate education, this philosophy is quickly confused.

Lewis continues his argument that a school’s mission cannot be compromised at the mercy of consumerism—and competition—driven decision making regarding course content and grading. Here, again, Christian institutions need to take leadership in delivering a distinct education. Just as Lewis insists that science (general education) and philosophy (values) cannot be separated or each will surely lose the potential depth of meaning, religious faith and academic matters must be married for cohesive identity development *as well*. While the concept of integration is woven into the rhetoric of Christian institutions, the quality implementation is harder to assess.

This transformation of education becoming more connected demands more comprehensive teaching and honest, qualitative grading habits. Whereas grading was originally employed as a method of notifying a student of his or her progress throughout each term of study, the consumer mentality has progressively infiltrated grading trends because student satisfaction is tied to awarding tenure to faculty. Instead of accurately reporting how students are performing, faculty are more apt to give higher grades to please students and advance their personal teaching careers in the process, thereby diluting their course content and results. Strangely enough, this mentality does not begin in the classroom, but the home, given that “Because students – and their parents – struggle for flawlessness, we do not make them responsible for their mistakes,” (p. 147) which further complicates the matter of expectations. Grade inflation is difficult to cap as students want to see their achievements grow on a scale that is fixed. The result is an overwhelming majority of perceived exceptional students, thus losing the meaning of excellence. In addition, the quality judgments given by grading are compromised and students learn less in a reduced curriculum that further separates content from application. Ultimately, faculty model a lifestyle to students of pursuing promotion and job security rather than the integrity and integration of the educational process.

Although Lewis speaks at length to the problem of grade inflation, he seems to compromise attention to it for what he considers to be more important and influential

issues in higher education such as advising, class size, quality of teaching, and meaningful curriculum (p. 146). Although it is essential to focus on a manageable scope of solutions for a problem to be solved, Lewis largely discredits his entire argument against grade inflation when trying to bring perspective to the problem in his final paragraph in chapter six. Lewis reasons that by resolving grade inflation, the institution may still deliver a severely flawed curriculum using ineffective techniques and environments. For this reason, assessment and reform should be focused on other aspects of the educational process.

However, Lewis does propose a wealth of challenges and solutions in his brief conclusion, arguably the most essential and engaging pages of his book to read. As in most of his arguments, the responsibility of restoring institutions of higher education rests on the faculty. It is this group of stakeholders that needs to hold education to a stronger, higher standard, even and especially in the face of challenge. Imagine with him for a moment if every college syllabus and programming session echoed the centering question, "If we do this, then over the course of four years, what lessons will [students] learn, and will they become better educated?" (p. 263). This question is central to the integrity of the educational institution, but Christian colleges have a subsequent question to ask: How will this transform the way students engage people, institutions and the world for Christ? This question of Christian worldview development is critical for carrying out the mission of Christian higher education.

All in all, Lewis delivers an honest and accurate critique of the current state of higher education and presents fair suggestions to redirect the institution. Ironically, his title speaks of an excellence that has lost its soul. Although his critiques are true and solutions well intending, the trendsetters and world changers he intends to produce through higher education will still have no soul with his diploma. It is the Christian college and the Christian in the college that holds the answer to fully realize education's potential and purpose. May we take this challenge seriously and lead the way from deeply ingrained dualisms to holistic development of our students.

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