

Academics Are Intellectual Entrepreneurs

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Higher education is a convenient political lightning rod. Witness the flap surrounding Harvard President Lawrence Summers's comments about women and science, the firestorm created by Colorado professor Ward Churchill, and public outcry regarding the alleged liberal bias of universities. Such fixations will electrocute everyone, not just academics.

Universities face tremendous challenges: dwindling fiscal support, deterioration of public sympathy, and the need to create supportive communities. The stakes could not be higher. It is time to stop obsessing over various "scandals of the moment" and think seriously about our long-term future and the role university systems must play in it.

Around the country, an idea is taking hold. Professors are viewing their mission as one of "academic engagement." As noted by University of Texas (UT) at Austin Professor Richard Cherwitz, academic engagement means that collaboration across disciplines and partnerships with the community must produce solutions to society's most vexing problems (Cherwitz 2005).

But it is not enough for schools to pursue this ideal. We need the understanding and assistance of the public, the media, and politicians of all stripes.

Too many have come to view university faculty as "ivory tower" dwellers, isolated from the concerns of ordinary people and insistent on promoting ideological agendas. My own experience as a professor at eight different schools—including a community college, secular and religious colleges, and research universities—has consistently exploded this myth. But, alas, my testimony

alone won't likely change many people's minds about academe.

Some may better understand what academics strive to do not by thinking of classes and books but of "intellectual capital." Like monetary capital, intellectual capital is the cumulative product of both individual effort and supportive communities. Intellectual capital is the dividend of years of hard work and practical experience that bears fruit by transforming lives and benefiting society. The best academics are, in the words of Cherwitz, "intellectual entrepreneurs—scholars who take risks and seize opportunities, discover and create knowledge, innovate, collaborate, and solve problems in any number of social realms" (Cherwitz 2002). Echoing Cherwitz's view, University of Rochester President Thomas Jackson (Jackson 2005) recently declared, "The best teachers and researchers are all 'intellectual entrepreneurs.' They're in the business of creating new information, new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing their particular discipline. A biomedical researcher working on the latest vaccine, a political scientist establishing a new way of looking at studying political processes, and a young musician figuring out how to create his or her path through the art world are every bit as entrepreneurial as someone establishing a new business."

Jackson's point is not that intellectual entrepreneurs can replace business entrepreneurs. Rather, academics are distinct kinds of entrepreneurs who work with and beside those in business. As Cherwitz, who directs UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship initiative and is a leader in the national movement to bring entrepreneurial thinking

to the arts and sciences, contends, understanding academics this way “requires us to acknowledge that a university’s collective wisdom is among its most precious assets—anchored to, but not in competition with, basic research and disciplinary knowledge—and that part of the significance of such wisdom is tied to its use” (Cherwitz 2005).

At the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center, my colleagues and I observe entrepreneurship every day: when faculty tackle complex issues involving public health, environmental resources, public education, and the needs of growing social and cultural diversity. At our best, we take on these challenges not for selfish gain or fame, but because we are—to borrow Cherwitz’s terminology—“citizen-scholars.” At our best, we seek more than narrow, theoretical knowledge; we seek academic engagement that passionately embraces the ethical obligation to contribute to society. In short, we want to both discover knowledge and put it to work in ways that make a real difference.

This is an aspect of our identity we desperately desire our fellow citizens to appreciate. But it is hard for this message to be heard. Rising tuition, war, and a myriad of scandals on college campuses drown out the deep investment universities are trying to make in our collective future. But without public recognition and endorsement, the social compact between higher education and the state it serves will disintegrate; all of us as shareholders will lose the social security of a future intelligently anticipated and planned for.

It is well understood that a state’s long-term fiscal security is closely connected with its investment in education. While paying the bills is important, there are many additional challenges. Rather than making universities scapegoats for the very real anxieties felt about pressing problems, let’s reflect on how universities are—and can increasingly become—forces for social good. Academics should be seen as intellectual entrepreneurs who stand on equal footing with those in the public and private sectors—citizens who are collaboratively producing knowledge to change lives and improve the human condition.

We are Americans fighting for America. We are scholars and we are citizens. Let us forge new productive and cooperative connections between ourselves to keep the nation strong in the twenty-first century.

References

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