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2009

Blog –First One

10-21-09

This is my inaugural blog. We all remember our first time for many things in life. This weekend I am going to have a reunion of sorts with a mentor of mine

My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I will be attending a special symposium this weekend to mark the tenth anniversary of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), one of the creators of which is Russell Edgerton, past President of the American Association for Higher Education and Director of the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning.

When Russ was serving in the late 90's as the senior program officer for The Pew Charitable Trusts he sat me down and asked me a question, a part of which I am still trying to answer: "John, if you and Betsy had one to five million dollars and one to five years to do anything you wanted to do to improve the beginning college experience, what would you do?"

The Trusts subsequently awarded us three grants to launch and build the Policy Center on the First Year of College. In 2007 Betsy, and our Center colleagues persuaded me to morph the center into a new 501c3 non-profit, immodestly named for me (www.jngi.org). We are still trying to answer Russ's original question: what would/could we do to improve the beginning college experience?

I hope my readers will become a blog community of practice and share their answers to the same fundamental question, hopefully, more broadly applied to all undergraduate education.

What Question(s) Would You Ask?

10-22-09

After launching an international movement to improve the beginning college experience from my former position at the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, I was challenged in 1999 by my mentor, Russ Edgerton of The Pew Trusts, to think afresh about what I/we could do if we had the time and money to do new work never before undertaken.

So much work had already been done to improve the beginning college experience. Admittedly, the driver for this was a pecuniary more than an educational vision: to generate more money through enhanced retention. Increasingly I experienced “retention fatigue” and longed for a more aspirational approach.

We seized upon the idea of asking another question instead: what would an EXCELLENT beginning experience look like—as opposed to one that would retain students?

To answer that question, we decided to develop a set of standards of excellence for the first of college, which institutions could use both to measure their performance and for aspirational strategic planning to achieve beginning excellence (standards found at www.fyfoundations.org).

Now, what matters more than the questions I have asked, are the ones you are pushing to achieve educational improvement and excellence.

So, what are the big questions you are raising? And with what results?

I learned in my own small college liberal arts education that the questions are often more important than the answers.

My big aha moment as a first-year student, was the question in Plato's Republic: what is justice? Same question today: what is justice for new students?

Homecoming: A vestigial organ, or an idea whose time has come?

1-26-09

It is fall, the most beautiful time of the year in the mountains of western North Carolina where I live with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and do much of my work. It is a time when my thoughts return to when I began college in the fall on the banks of the Ohio River in southern Appalachia. It is Homecoming time.

I have often thought- who is it that the students come back to see? Surely it is not the staff and administration for my generation, because that was the era when we had few staff and no student affairs professionals. We came back to see the faculty, and each other. During my thirteen years as a Vice Chancellor, I kept reminding myself: the students won't be coming back to see me.

Admittedly, this notion of "Homecoming" is an anachronism that doesn't, couldn't work at so many colleges of today: those with no football teams, no residence halls, those with student bodies that are as "adult" as they are recent high school graduate. But on the other hand, why shouldn't all campuses have a "homecoming" to invite the return of students to that environment where they developed new identities, new hopes, new realities, new credentials, new skills? Wouldn't it be in our self-interests as institutions of higher learning to cultivate this notion of campus as a "home" with all the notions of sanctuary that that connotes, and to which you return periodically throughout life, if not daily? I think so.

So, assuming all of us then could have Homecoming on our own campus, what would we want to be remembered for by our students? Why in the world would they want to come back and see us again? What kind of feedback would you want your students to give you, now that they finally had the detachment on their experiences with you and the wisdom that only aging in the real world can provide? Oh, that we should treat our students every day in a manner that they would want to come back at Homecoming.

Education for What?

10-29-09

In 1992 I spent 10 days in Norway with my professional colleague (and future wife), Betsy Barefoot. We were visiting and working with a group of small, regional engineering colleges to improve success of their first-year students. We learned that engineering was very important to the Norwegian government because engineering in Norway was what legal education is in the US: the training ground for the country's future political leadership.

This is just one of the many occasions when I have thought about the basic question: higher education for what? And I know what the most common lay person's answers are to that question: jobs, salary, opportunity, etc. All true.

But for me, I think the most important purpose of higher education is to educate America's future leaders.

I went to a small, liberal arts college, Marietta, a transformative place for me, that has now, what it didn't have when I was a student, but oh how I wish it did: a bachelors degree in leadership studies. I would love to go back and do that, do college all over again. But I can't. So what I can do is to help colleges lay the foundation for leadership education in the beginning first-year experience. You can do that too.

The New Normal for "Night School"

11-3-09

I am in Boston which is of no consequence to any reader, but this reminds me of an attention grabbing story in The New York Times last week, page 1, above the fold, about a new meaning to "night school." The focus of the story was on the huge influx of enrollment of students into community colleges and the resultant space capacity crunch and how some colleges were dealing with this by expanding hours of operation. As an illustration, Bunker Hill Community College in Boston is offering classes starting as late as 11:30 PM running until 2:30 AM. Other colleges are moving earliest class to 6:00 AM. So readers, how many of us were so committed to our own college experience that we would go at 11:30 at night or 6:00 AM in the morning to an academic event?!

So here I am in Boston where American higher education began in 1636 with the founding of Harvard, and where the ongoing refinement of higher education is taking still another new form. Given the low probability of increased government funding for higher education, this massive shift of students into the two-year sector will be the "new normal."

This leads me to think of the resilience, the adaptability, the creativity, the necessity, of both our highered enterprise and our students. They need us more than ever. Our country needs them more than ever.

Personally, I admire the kind of thinking that went into the decisions to make higher ed available, literally at all costs, in any legitimate way, and the remarkable determination and courage of those seeking what we have to offer.

We have a great responsibility to such students, all our students. What a privilege to work with such brave new beginners. And we all have students like these.

Let's take the "H" out of Housing: It's all in a name!

11-4-09

In the late 80's when I was directing the National Resource Center for The First Year Experience at USC, we entered into a collaborative project with ACUHO, the Association of College and University Housing Officers--International, namely, to produce a monograph on the importance of the "residential first-year experience." This seemed like a no brainer for me in that the largest percentage of students in college- owned residence halls are first-year. Well, we had a great partnership and such a monograph was produced.

At the same time the outsourced "housing" movement was developing, and more and more companies were getting into the act and I began to see them as a threat potentially, and certainly a competitor to college owned housing operations. It seemed apparent to me that "housing" is not the core business of the academy whereas "housing" was the core business of these companies. I came to conclude that "housing" was really not the business we should be in and that the very term itself was inviting outsourced "housing" to organizations that could do it better. My argument was/is that we are in the "education" business but conducted in a residential context on college campuses. Now this is more than a semantic distinction. Names reflect culture and values.

At the same time for a half century or so the US higher ed accounting model had classified "housing" as "auxiliary" revenues. I came to regard this as a terrible idea because it reinforced the perception that the primary role of such units was to "make money." Hence the reporting model, I understand at many places "housing" reports through business channels.

And further, at the same time, in the 1990's I became very involved in promoting the basic theme that we needed to ramp up the extent of "academic" initiatives in the residence halls, particularly the concept of "residential colleges." So, again, in partnership with housing professionals, we at the USCNRC published a monograph on the residential college concept.

Then I went over the edge. I wrote, I seem to recall either the President or a number of the members of the ACUHO Board of Directors, this was somewhere in the mid-late 90's and I spelled out my concerns about the "H" in their name. I got no response. I assume they felt, quite correctly, that my feedback was both unsolicited and meddling.

And, so, that brings us to where we are today: the "H" is still there. I see the "H" as a vestige of the old era of student affairs work, largely unconnected to the academic enterprise and mission and more concerned with "affairs" than with learning. I have also seen the role of the "H" played out on many campuses where the "housing director" is either still attached to the vestigial view of such facilities and/or in conflict with more contemporary thinkers and trying to integrate the academic curriculum into the residential life environs. So, in conclusion, I see the presence or absence of the "H" as being fundamental to what this profession is all about. I also believe that the higher ed residential setting has changed much more than the ethos of the organization, apparently, by the continuing presence of the "H".

Ok, now what to do about this? More in tomorrow's blog posting.

An Alternative to “Housing” for the Higher Ed Lexicon

11-6-09

Recently, I wrote that I thought the “Housing” ought to come out of the higher ed lexicon. So what about a replacement?

I have not tinkered for years, mentally, with what an alternative name could be—particularly one that wouldn't be a true mouthful. One idea- “ACU” for Academic Residential Environments (ACUARE). And maybe we should throw the key word “learning” in there somewhere. I argued in my introduction to the ACUHO/FYE monograph years ago that residence halls have always been a place for “learning.” But I think the question has increasingly become: what should students be learning in such contexts and is what they definitely are learning what we would ideally want them to be learning? So, how about “Academic Residential Learning Environments” (ACUARLE)? or “Collegiate Residential Academic Learning Environments” (CRALE). That last acronym is slightly more pronounceable! “Collegiate” is generic for “college and university” and “collegiate” is also meant to differentiate from “corporate” as in outsourced housing. I think that somewhere the three words “residential” and “academic” and “learning” are central. I am sure there could be other semantic reorderings for consideration.

The practical question would immediately be thrown out: “Well, what would the “Housing office on campus become known as?” Good question. How about simply the “Residential Learning” office? Students would have to sign a “residential learning” contract. Campuses would adopt “residential learning” policies. There, that's solved. Quite simple. And it is a great improvement over “housing” which, again, says nothing about learning—or being “on campus.”

I think the time for a name change has come. What a boost a name change would give to the whole movement to push student affairs in more academic directions. It seems not changing the name flies in the face of everything the student affairs profession has been trying to do since 1994 with the first publication of the profession's core mantra: *The Student Learning Imperative*. Or more recently restated as: *Learning Reconsidered*.

Finally, I think I am put off by the language of ACUHO because it is fundamentally a business paradigm and not an educational one. In that sense it is in keeping with other more “corporate” directions of the academy which profoundly disturb me. Ah, I feel the subject of another blog coming on.

Students in Transition

11-9-09

This is the name of a conference that is being hosted by the University of South Carolina for the 16th time, since 1995. I know because I am the founder of this conference series and I write this as I attend the 16th edition. This is really all about a very simple idea. Sort of like bottled water. Or the roller bag suitcase.

Why didn't someone else think of it? Frankly, I don't know. I am amazed no one else had. I had been organizing conferences on what came to be called "The First-Year Experience" since 1982, and no one had been doing that before. And there was a need to convene higher educators to talk about new students and how to help them succeed. I needed to learn more about that, which is why I organized these meetings—and even more importantly to help other educators.

In 1989 I met a university President, Betty Siegel, at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, who shared with me her keen interest in college seniors, their transition experiences out of college, and how she had designed a seminar to help them do just that. Also in that same year my older son was a senior at the University of South Carolina. And I was thinking a lot about what he needed as a senior in transition, and what my university was, or was not doing to help him make that transition successfully.

I felt so inspired by Betty Siegel, and my son, that I asked her to co-host a conference with the University of South Carolina on the topic of "The Senior Year Experience." We did so in 1990 and again in 1991, 93 and 94. The response was good, but not good enough to pay the bills. So I decided to roll this focus on the "senior year experience" into a still broader focus: "students in transition."

Thus, the "students in transition" concept was born and we held our first conference in Dallas in 1995. The response was enormous. For the first time, educators came together to discuss the transition challenges of: first-year students; those in the "sophomore slump"; the transfer student experience; the senior year experience, and more. The key assumption was that college students are "in transition." And the key challenge for higher educators to examine was really a dual one: how are our campuses organized to help "students in transition"; and thus, how are we in transition, and not just the students?

And those are still the driving questions today, in 2009!

Veteran's Day Salute

11-11-09

November 11th is a day devoted to recognizing our veterans who have served in our armed forces. I am proud to say I am a veteran. I am indebted to my military experience during the Vietnam era because it gave me my career as a higher educator and my first big break with the University of South Carolina, where I began my work on the first year, and still continue some of that work today.

I graduated from college in 1965, and for able bodied, young, college degree holding, men like me there were only these options:

1. Volunteer to serve in the armed forces
2. Allow yourself to be "drafted" in the armed forces
3. Gain a draft deferment through marriage
4. Or obtain a deferment by work for a defense industry employer
5. Or obtain a deferment by going to seminary
6. Or by going to graduate school.
7. Flee to some other country with non extradition treaty for draft avoidance.

Upon my graduation, I didn't know what I wanted to do. But I knew I didn't want to go to Canada, much as I loved that country from living there five years as a child. And I didn't want to be drafted. And I knew I wasn't mature enough for marriage, although I had several possible candidates. And I had no interest in seminary. So I chose graduate school. And off I went. But, Uncle Sam had other plans for me. I came from a draft board region of the country where they ran out of non college grads to draft and so they started drafting college grads, including me. So I volunteered for the Air Force, which made me an instant psychiatric social worker, based on my MA in American Studies!

After OTS and basic training I was sent to South Carolina to the 363rd Tactical Hospital at Shaw AFB, Sumter. My squadron commander called me in and told me that his review of my record suggested I had more education than anyone in the squadron except the physicians, and that therefore he wanted me to do some college teaching. I had never before thought of being a college teacher, even though I had been an outstanding undergraduate student, once beyond my first year. None of my professors had ever suggested I emulate them. Amazing. What a poor job they did of recruiting their successors.

But the Air Force was much more intrusive! Two days later I was sent to the University of South Carolina for a review of my credentials and emerged having been approved to teach six adjunct courses. And, I started teaching my first college course, two weeks later, a couple of days before my 23rd birthday, looking much younger than many of my students, particularly because I lacked much hair. My first teaching was at an open admissions, two-year, non residential campus of the University, very much like a community college, in Lancaster, S.C.

I eventually learned in later work at USC how much the Air Force had taught me (the subject of another blog!) about how to teach people to survive and "transition" into an important new educational experience. I am so glad I am a veteran. For me, it was truly life transforming, and new life giving.

Veterans Day Reflection: All I Ever Needed to Know about Orienting New Students to College I Learned in the Military

11-12-09

Veteran's Day has come and gone again. And I am reminded of how much I learned from my military service about helping new college students survive their transition experience. I learned much of this from my two drill sergeants whose names I still remember 43 years later.

One was Staff Sergeant Small, who was about 6 feet, 9 inches tall and whose previous tour of duty had been as a White House Honor Guard. I had never had a teacher so "proud." And he was my first "teacher" of another race. He had this ability to capture my attention by asking commanding questions. This reminded me of a goal of a goal of a good liberal arts education: that sometimes the question is more important than the answer.

For example he would say: "Listen up: do you want to survive Vietnam? If so, you have to know there are three ways to do things: the right way, the wrong way, and the Air Force way. And I am going to unlearn you the first two, and learn you the latter!"

So, what were my lessons?

1. First we have to tell our students what we are going to "learn" them. Then we have to "learn" them. And then we have to tell them what we "learned" them. And that's an exact quote from Sgt. Small.
2. At any college or university, there are three ways to do anything: the right way, wrong way, and the institutional way. We must teach the institutional way.
3. Students learn best, like the troops, when authority figures believe they can be taught and that they can learn.
4. When given the choice, most students will chose to make positive choices to learn to do whatever they need to do to survive.
5. Thus students can be taught and learn "survival skills."
6. New students need to learn a new language of a new culture, and its history, traditions, customs.
7. College students need a "basic training" for college.
8. Ideally, this is an extended, intentional orientation, preferably dispensed in a credit bearing course.
9. Every institution has a mission, and the sooner the student figures that out, the more likely he/she will achieve a successful fit.

This recollection of my learnings reminds me of how nearly 40 years later we selected a military university as an "Institution of Excellence" in the first college year (I feel another blog coming on!).

Why Does the First-Year Matter?

11-16-09

More than ever this is a story we must be telling. Like the most important things in life (e.g. “I love you”) the most important messages must be delivered repeatedly and explicitly. I raise this because almost daily I am hearing anecdotes about the ravages of the “Great Recession” on first-year programs—and their reduction or elimination.

I have seen this before: in the recessions of 1980-82, 1990-92, and 2000-2002, but this one appears to be more extensive. First-year programs are often vulnerable for multiple reasons: they are newer, may be led by younger and non-faculty educators, often disproportionately serve disadvantaged students; are not based in traditional academic departments with more power, and have more part-time and marginalized employees, etc.

So in these times you need a mantra that cannot be said too often. Why does the first-year matter? Because it is that critical period of transition when:

1. Students receive their foundational coursework
2. Students form their attitudes towards faculty, staff and the institution
3. Students do or do not develop college level study habits
4. Students may or may not overcome negative attitudes towards formal education acquired during their previous educational experiences
5. Students are assessed to give us base line assessment data in order for us to determine how we add value and to demonstrate accountability for such outcomes
6. Students should be introduced to service opportunities
7. Students learn our institutional mission and the roles and purposes of higher education
8. Students have their first college experiences which form the “foundation” for ultimate mission attainment
9. Students choose those all important relationships with other students that will influence their success
10. Students make important choices about which groups to affiliate with and thus be influenced by
11. Students begin the acquisition of lifelong adult habits of mind and behavior
12. Students develop and improve time and other self management skills
13. Students decide whether to persist or drop out.

How could there be any doubt that the first year matters? Unfortunately, the question is not asked often enough. What matters is that you develop your own mantra and rationale. I hope this will inspire you.

Power to the Peers!

11-19-09

The ring of the header above has to reveal that I am a child of the 60's with its evocation of "power to the people." I confess, I am. That was the period in which I acquired my idealism which drives me still. I was inspired by President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, the early feminist thinkers and leaders, the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements, the anti-war movement, in which I participated after I completed my tour of military service, honorably and with gratitude, the subject of another blog. Anyway, to the point of this blog: students have always had power.

Decades of good research has determined that the single greatest influence on college student decision making during the college years, is the influence of other students. This is one of those things like the working in college phenomena. We can't beat it. Why not join it? This is to say, once you recognize the enormous influence of students on students, the logical conclusion should be we need to try to influence this by putting the students we want to influence other students into positions of influence to do just that.

Inspired by uses of "peer mentors" in first-year seminars that I saw at such places as Baldwin-Wallace College (OH) and Kean University of New Jersey, I decided in 1991, when I was the Executive Director of University 101 at the University of South Carolina, to personally be the first 101 instructor to use a "peer mentor" as a test case. It was a wonderful experience. I am indebted to my peer leader, Ms. Lisa Huttinger, for giving me and my students such a wonderful experience. And then I became even more indebted to my Co-director of University 101, Professor Dan Berman for picking up the ball and creating our powerful peer leader program at USC. Today, over 175 sections of the course annually have a peer leader.

I say "even more indebted" because my colleague, Dan Berman, had been a sophomore at Marietta College in 1961, when I was a floundering first-year student also at Marietta. And it was his spontaneous and generous reaching out to influence me, by showing me how to take lecture notes, and select really engaging professors, that I attribute more than anything else to getting me off academic probation. I often think were it not for my own "peer leader" I would never have been able to stay in college, and then go on to help other college students. Power to the peers!

How Long Has It Been Since You Were in a High School?

11-18-09

With all the evidences of under preparation and negative attitudes towards learning that we see in some of our students, it sure is handy to have the public schools to blame! Where would we be without them (in more ways than one)? This observation reminds me of a professional student affairs officer (Mark Shanley, now of Miami University of Ohio and once of my beloved original USC) who opined to me: "John, it is a lot easier to just sit back and be critical of the abuses of fraternities, than it is to do something constructive." By "constructive" he meant serving as a faculty advisor to a fraternity. So he conned me into doing that—for 16 years. That's another story. But what about doing something "positive" with our colleagues who are preparing to send us our new students?

Last night I did such a thing. I did a presentation (be glad to send you a copy) for 9th graders and their parents at the local high school in the community where I live. I so enjoyed these families, their optimism, concerns, and appreciation for how important they know college is to their futures as families.

The fact that I could be there at all still amazed me. I say this because back around 1994 I decided that it was high time I offered to do some "volunteer community service" in the small South Carolina city where I was living, Lexington. I thought, well what could I do? What skills and knowledge do I have that might have any socially redeeming value in my community? My answer was to go out to the local high school, meet with the director of guidance, and offer to do a pro bono workshop for college-bound seniors. She was stunned that I would make such an offer and said that she would not be empowered to make such a decision and that I had to see the principal. So I did. And he sat stone faced, arms crossed on his chest, appraising me as some commie, pinko, liberal educator wanting to come in and contaminate his kids, whose job his was to protect. So he declined my offer.

Never taking "no" for an answer very well, I thought about how could I get my knowledge in that school. Then I had an inspiration: put it on video and sell it to the school. And, that's what I did, thanks to USC and the wonderful talents of South Carolina Educational Television. They produced a video "Your College Experience" which was sold all over the country, generating high six figure revenues, and hopefully helping some college bound students.

This time in Brevard, North Carolina, there were no such roadblocks. And this has become a significant form of community service for me. I have met with college bound seniors and parents, rising juniors and parents about college choice, and ninth grade students and parents about why go to college and how to prepare for that over the high school years.

Any of my readers could do this too. And/or you could do other things to bring your expertise and good will to our partners in the secondary schools. I hope you will consider doing so. It takes a whole village to raise a successful college student.

Can Your Thanksgivings Past Be Instructive for Your Students?

11-23-09

Thanksgiving has so many possible purposes and meanings. When I think of my life of great fortune to be a higher educator, my thoughts at Thanksgiving season naturally turn to some of my past Thanksgivings, for example, when I was a college student. I draw upon these occasionally for homilies for my students. I am going to do several blogs on this topic.

It was Thanksgiving 1961, the year the Berlin Wall went up and the first year of John Kennedy's presidency. And it was the first year of John Gardner's college experience. I was a seventeen year old "freshman", at a beautiful, small, rural, liberal arts college, on the banks of the Ohio and Muskingum Rivers in Marietta, Ohio. And oh was I homesick. And my mid term grades showed it: 3F's, 2D's and one A. What was the A in? You guessed it: PE, most challenging thing I did that fall: rowing crew. One of those D's was in what I do now occasionally: public speaking.

Well, that year was 13 years before the US Senate amended the Privacy Act to permit colleges and universities NOT to send grades home to parents. As is rarely the case for me, I was ahead of my times. So my grades were mailed home to my parents. It was not an occasion for Thanksgiving, but it was an occasion for discussion with them, reflection, admonishment and more.

How are you going to use your Thanksgivings past for at least one homily that might lead at least one student to a small epiphany?

Ode to Thanksgivings Past: Part Two

11-24-09

This is the second in my continuing reflections on the possible meanings of Thanksgivings past.

It was the fall of my junior year of college, 1963. After a near disastrous start two years before, I had become a very, very good student. But I was still terrified of math and science. So I learned from my really helpful academic advisor, that there was a course I could take that would qualify as a "laboratory science" but that would be less challenging than a traditional lab science. Oh, how wrong he was. The course? Principles of Food Preparation.

I was the only male in the class; with 29 women. You can imagine what kind of thoughts they had about me. One of our lab requirements was to bake a loaf of bread from scratch. So I made my attempt in my Wednesday lab class, one week before Thanksgiving. The yeast did not rise in its bowl. And it was declared DOA. My very demanding professor told me that if I wanted to pass the lab portion of the course I had to repeat the exercise and that the only option I had was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, the very day before. So I had to reschedule my flight home, at additional expense to my parents. I went back to the lab, succeeded this time in baking a loaf; then went to the airport for a late night flight back to New York City on Thanksgiving Eve, carrying my little loaf of bread with me.

We ate that bread in celebratory communion that next day. And I reflected that that professor had taught me an important lesson about negative stereotyping about other disciplines (in this case Home Economics) and about high standards for exactitude. That loaf of life giving bread, was a symbol for me that I had come a long way from Thanksgiving of two years before, with my mid term grades of 3F's, 2D's and one A.

I went back to college the next week; came to finals; made the highest grade in the class on the final exam (that's right, higher than all the women), but my poor lab performance yielded me a B for the course, my only B for that whole year. I was still very thankful.

A Thanksgiving That Was Forever a Teachable Moment: My 9/11 11-20-09

Friday, November 20, is the 46th anniversary of the assassination of President John Kennedy. Like most all of my generation, this was our 9/11. I remember where I was that day, what I was doing, what I was thinking. My world would never be the same. It has remained a powerful epiphany for Thanksgiving.

On a beautiful, sunny, warm, late fall day in Marietta, Ohio, I was sitting in class in political philosophy, really engaged in what one of my favorite professors was telling us. We were reading one of the greatest works of western civilization: Plato's Republic. We had been spending weeks discussing one of the two most central questions of that work, two questions that are still paramount in my mind each day of my adult life: What is Justice? And Who Should Rule?

That day, the professor, Dr. R.S. Hill, was about to lead us to the answer to the second question: that, of course, philosophers should be kings. But he didn't quite get there that day because our class was interrupted with the news of the President's assassination. Class was excused.

I went outside and briefly talked with fellow students. But I found no answers, no solace in that. So I went to where I always found solace, to the place on campus where was stored the truth of all ages: the Library. And I spent several hours in there meditating, and taking in the smell, the feel, the constancy of that holy place.

Later that afternoon a college-wide announcement went out that classes for the following week would be cancelled! I was stunned. That was the Monday and Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Monday was declared a day of national mourning. So the College administration decided that because they would be obligated to cancel classes on Monday, that it seemed pointless to keep the students around from Friday to Tuesday.

The reaction: pandemonium. Sheer jubilation on the part of many of my fellow students. That Friday evening was one all night party. I was shocked. How could they be celebrating when the cause of this unanticipated extended vacation was the murder of our President? This was one more of the many clues I was getting in college that I was different from most of my fellow students and probably would never quite "fit in" outside the academy. But I didn't know that yet.

I also didn't know yet that that other unresolved question—what is justice—would be the guiding intellectual, social, moral, political question paramount to my life. This also became my principal professional question: what is justice—for first-year students, sophomores, seniors, and transfers.

Thanksgiving is one more occasion for us to reflect with our students on what are the most important questions we all need to be pursuing in college. For in college and life, the questions are often more empowering than the answers.

Thankful for the Access We Once Had

11-30-09

In the continuing spirit of Thanksgiving, I am thankful for the access we once had in our country to our greatest universities, made possible by a consensus of public policy to keep these access costs relatively low. Those were the halcyon days; by no means perfect, but infinitely better than what lies ahead.

I refer to the announcement last week that affects us all: the decision by the University of California Board of Regents to raise tuition by 32% for next fall. As *The New York Times* opined—"A Crown Jewel of Education Struggles....."

I lived in a state for three decades that could easily dismiss California as another country, as one where things that happened there, surely can't happen here. But they are and will. California led the way on an enormous orgy of personal, corporate, government debt and dysfunctional government gridlock. California's system of higher education based on extraordinary innovation and public investment in low cost access and infrastructure, led the way too.

This suggests to me one more way the poor are going to be "whacked" as Tony Soprano would say. We all know who is going to be less able to attend the fabled UC System. And this is going to trickle down to almost all the rest of the states.

So what can we individual educators do? It is my hope that we can still use whatever forces we have for conscience, for advocacy, for equity, to try to shape what policies and practices we may still control to remember the poor, the less fortunate, who equally deserve access to our country's flagships. I am not ready to give up this "ship" yet, but I am very worried that the Civil Rights movement has finally ended. Without low cost access to the very best public universities in our land, there can be no hope of leveling the playing field.

Q: And what did you do over Thanksgiving vacation? A: What you did is who you are.

12-1-09

When I either read (skim) or hear about many blogs, the subjects of which are so intensely personal right down to the minutia, my usual response is: "Who cares?" Followed by: "Not me." So I am not going to write about what I did over Thanksgiving even though it was a good one for me, and for which I am thankful.

The question though of how I versus you, good reader, spent our respective Thanksgiving vacations, reminds me for some reason of a really insightful explanation I was offered once by a practicing sociologist whose subtle mind and insights I admired, one Phillip Weinberger, a professor at Waynesburg College in Pennsylvania.

I once heard a presentation by Professor Weinberger about the challenges of transition to college faced by working class students, i.e. children of working class parents. Weinberger argued that such children encountered in college for the first time people (faculty) for whom work was never left "at work"; and for whom one's "work" was synonymous with one's identity. Thus, what you did, "profess" was synonymous with what you are, "professor". My son once asked me why I asked so many questions? I told him because that's what I am and what I do. Professor Weinberger explained to me that first-year college students from working class parents were more likely to be suitcase college students: i.e. they were more likely to go home over weekends, because they had learned from their parents that work was something you left behind; you did not take it home with you; and you got away from it as soon as you could. Work was merely an instrumental means to an end, life. For faculty though, work was life, the life of the mind.

And so I think about our students. Would it be worth asking our students, perhaps more for our information than theirs, how many of them did "work" (i.e. academic work) over the holidays? I am positive a greater proportion of us academics did "work" over the same period, myself included.

These class differences are increasingly an important part of determining the fit of college, the success of transition, the understanding of new options for identity. Successful transition to college may not look like rocket science, but I would argue that it is almost as complex, and even more important.

The Blog as First-Year Student Diary: Writing is for Life

12-3-09

When I went to college as a first-year student, I wasn't like the majority of today's new students: I went away from home. And there wasn't any internet or cell phones. Hence I wrote letters, real honest to God letters, hundreds of them. Oh how I wished I had asked my correspondents to save my letters. What a wonderful record they would have comprised for me, my children, and now grandchildren, about how a student can grow, change, mature, learn, suffer, ache—the whole gamut of possible outcomes. My letters were an opportunity for reflection, and for me to record my collegiate journey.

It was some years later after college when I had become something I never could have imagined during my own first college year I would be: a college professor helping students adjust to college. And I learned a strategy from one of my most special colleagues, Professor Jerry Jewler, that was a sort of analog, precursor, to a student blog. Jerry was a very talented professor of advertising and was working with me as the Co-Director of the University of South Carolina's first-year seminar, University 101. He introduced a pedagogy into all sections of our course which we called simply: the weekly letter.

The assignment to our students was they were to write us a one page letter, each week. It was to have an introduction, body and conclusion and to develop one idea in one page. The instructor would usually provide a "trigger", a focus, for the weekly letter. The stated goal of the exercise was to give the students an additional opportunity to practice simple written communication in a professional context.

But the real object was to provide three things: 1) a process for the student to reflect on what he/she was learning in college and their own collegiate journey; 2) an "early alert" system so that a student could communicate any significant problems to a caring university employee who could then intervene if appropriate; and 3) provide a structure for a relationship to develop between the student and an instructor, showing the student that writing was a means to develop relationships.

Each year in the first week of the semester, my "trigger" for the first of the weekly letters was: "write me a letter about the most significant unresolved problem you have had in your first week at the University". One year, two of my twenty seven students wrote me that their most significant unresolved problem during the first week had been that they had been raped.

Writing my own blog has reminded me of what I did during my own first year of college, and what our students did in the weekly letters. So I would heartily endorse the idea of asking first-year students to start and maintain a blog to record their collegiate journey. Just think of the value to them, and also to qualitative researchers needing qualitative data for assessment purposes.

My colleague Jerry Jewler is retired now, but still writing, textbooks in fact. He and I both knew back in the 80's that writing is not just for English 101, writing is for life.

The Times They Are A'Changing: our Friendly Regional Accreditors

12-07-09

I have just spent the weekend with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and about 3000 higher educators in Atlanta for the annual meeting of our regional accreditor, "SACS", the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Who says we can't change in higher ed? This meeting certainly ain't like it used to be.

As a career higher educator and public employee in South Carolina, I had been through three of the SACS self studies in 1969-70, 79-80 and 89-90, and I resolved I wasn't going to stick around for a fourth. They were deadly dull, ponderous, enormous exercises in bean counting; huge institutional exercises that comprised a shell game to create a magnum opus sufficient to get us off the hook for another decade. The report would sit on the shelf and in many or even most cases have no impact at all, particularly in terms of driving educational change.

So I took early retirement and founded with my wife a non-profit higher education organization. And now I am thinking about regional accreditation self studies almost every day. And I am participating in not only my own geographic region's annual accreditor meeting but later this week Betsy and I are headed for the annual Middle States Meeting in Philadelphia; and I April we will participate in both the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) meeting in Chicago and the Western Association of Colleges and Schools (WASC) meeting in Long Beach. What's happened?

What's happened is that in the last decade the accreditors have reinvented themselves. They have become, in my judgment the biggest forces driving change on college campuses. For those of us whose primary focus is to help facilitate change in higher education to improve student learning, success, and retention, the accreditors are now the best partners we have. They are where the action is.

For an educator like me, who was used to conducting a relatively meaningless "self study," the two most dreaded words in the higher ed lexicon, there has been a sea change. Now, most of the accreditors have a mechanism for campuses to develop an improvement project of some kind which becomes a central focus of the reaffirmation process. What an incredibly simple but powerful idea: let campuses voluntarily choose something they want to get better at and reward them with reaffirmation of accreditation.

I would certainly rather have our own peers in regional accrediting non profit, non governmental organizations doing the accrediting and quality control, than say: the federal government or a state agency. So let's hear it for the accreditors. And if those of you working to improve the experience of new and transfer students, haven't yet linked your institutional improvement efforts to the larger campus processes of reaffirmation of accreditation, well, you have been missing out on a huge lever for change. Connecting say first-year work to accreditation has the potential to move your narrowly focused, and perhaps relatively low status, work to the top of the institution's priority list. Please consider this. Accreditation really has changed, in both process and importance.

I feel this coming: the four-year degree must go!

12-9-09

Back in what Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* called "Bushworld," I just knew this couldn't last: lowering taxes; increasing government spending and debt; spreading democracy by invasion of two sovereign nations; accelerating deregulation; encouraging consumer debt and home ownership for those who couldn't afford it; ignoring New Orleans. I knew things couldn't last. What were we thinking when we allowed all this to happen? And then the house of cards came tumbling down. This is truly The Great Recession. And things aren't going to go back to the way they were: the new normal. And one of the casualties is going to be the four-year degree. It's just too expensive.

Let's face it: we just can't afford it any longer. Consumers can't. Institutions can't. Governments can't. This unique American idea of a "four-year degree" with significant amounts of "general education," which prolong time to degree completion rates and which many students (and faculty) don't want, is going to become a vestigial organ.

We simply have to accelerate the process for degree attainment. Four to six years is simply too long to sustain the race. Perhaps one of the very best means we have to increase degree attainment is to decrease the required credit hours and hence decrease costs, and time to degree completion rates. Oh this makes me so sad. Our students will be less "well rounded." There will be far fewer opportunities to introduce students to potential majors they never considered before (e.g. anthropology). Students will not have the grounding in writing, speaking, numeracy skills, knowledge of our own history, political systems, literature, world cultures, you name it. The professional majors will be the ones in the life boat.

This will accelerate the conversion of two-year colleges to what I am calling "comprehensive colleges," offering two-year degrees through open admissions and allowing students to AVOID transfer by remaining at the same institution.

The times they are a-changing. Instead of putting a gun to my head over this, I think we have to get out front on this, manage it, use it as a catalyst to rethink everything we are doing, perhaps including the basic paradigm of looking at degree attainment is simply a matter of accumulating credits through seat time. What an exciting opportunity this may present. As Rahm Emmanuel has so famously said: "a crisis is a terrible opportunity to waste."

My Philosophy of Student Success

12-11-09

When I was on the graduate faculty of the University of South Carolina I taught (often with Betsy Barefoot) a seminar once a year for students in the master's and doctoral program in higher education administration. And we would ask them to write as part of their final examination, a philosophy statement for their philosophy of higher education. For most all of them, they had never been asked to think or write anything explicitly of this nature. But, of course, they did have philosophies, just as you do. And these are the basis of our daily actions on behalf of student success. Anyway, compare yours with mine:

I want to both affirm and be transparent about some of my beliefs and what I hope are common beliefs: I believe in the dignity and worth of all students, each student
I believe that what matters most is what we do for ALL students, not just some students I believe that I can teach students to be successful
I believe that there is a demonstrable body of knowledge about teaching student success

I believe that what a student is today, in terms of prior achievement, predicted collegiate ability and high school rank in class, is not necessarily a valid predictor of what the student can become

I believe that these indicators do not measure students' basic intelligence or motivation, nor our ability to successfully intervene

I believe that all students are "developmental" I believe that all students are potentially at risk
I believe that we have to focus on the big picture, what is best for our institutions and all students, not necessarily our own students or programs

I believe that the greatest influence on students during their time in college is the influence of other students, and hence the need to intentionally put our very best students in positions of influence on their peers
I believe that it is the obligation and opportunity for government (and our public institutions) to intervene and to engineer opportunities for students – this is, I admit, a brand of old fashioned liberalism.
I believe in the value of holistic education that addresses the intellectual, personal, social, physical, spiritual, and safety needs of all students

I believe that educationally purposeful and meaningful learning experiences can and should take place anywhere that students, faculty and staff come together.

I believe that we must be and are advocates for what I coined in 1995 as "students in transition": first-time college students; new students to your campus be the first time in college or transfer; sophomores who are not over the first-year hump and instead are in "slump," and senior students preparing to leave higher education, at least for the time being.

Why We are In This Work

12-14-09

Particularly when times are tough for both us higher educators and our students, I think it is important to pause every now and then to reflect on and remind ourselves why we are in this work often called "student success." I invite you to join me in some reflections on why are we in this work anyway? Because...

- it makes a difference for students
- it delivers on the promise of access while simultaneously maximizes resources
- it's a way for us to repay the gift
- it keeps us learning and developing
- we see enormous progress in some of the most initially unlikely candidates for success
- it is a form of social justice
- it extends and continues the unfinished civil rights and women's movements
- it creates for us an affinity group/network which brings us together with those of like values
- for some of us it has not only secular redeeming social value, but transcendent, spiritual worth as well
- it promotes the health of the body politic and the personal health of our citizens who by becoming college graduates have increased their probability of a longer life span

Ok, that's why I am in this work. How about you?

'Tis the Season: For Engaging Our Students in Taking Stock

12-16-09

The December holidays are soon upon us and we are finishing up our academic terms with our students. What an unfortunate combination of the most intense of academic calendar pressures combined with all the cultural pressures that the holiday season evokes. Studying for exams, shopping, gift buying, going even more into debt, indulging in even more social activities; this all piles up. In this case, we did have a much better idea back in the 60's when most academic terms ended in January so that students could study over the December holidays and return to college in January with a few more weeks to get it all together before finals without the distractions of the December solstice.

This raises a question, and an opportunity, for those of us who work directly with students. The question: how can we work with our students to use the end of the term/end of the calendar year/the emotional holiday period, to take stock of their lives? The opportunity: this is a fine time to take stock; help them benchmark their lives with December's past, set goals for the New Year and the spring academic term.

I always urge my students to remember that it is not too late to try to pull the term out, that magic can occur in the final grading process. I urge them not to make major life decisions, like whether or not to return to college, change their major, terminate a relationship, during this most emotional, irrational, time of year.

The opportunity: this brief window of end of term time with our students, post Thanksgiving, before the late December celebrations, to think through with them what is going to be a plan for support of them for the coming year. Many of us higher educators who work with new students have disproportionately invested in student support interventions that last the first term only, for example, a first-year seminar. How are we going to replace that support group which will be ending when final grades are submitted in December?

So, December is not only a time for final papers, final exams. It is a time for final, year-end reflection on the year we and our students have had and how we can help them next year. As higher educators, the more intentional we can be about taking advantage of this question and opportunity, the more likely we are to give our students a December gift that really matters and lasts.

How is “change” affecting our students? Oh, in just a few ways!

12-21-09

Come to think of it, this question would make a great brainstorming activity! I was recently asked this question by a staff member at my publisher, Bedford/St. Martins: “How is change affecting today’s college students.” This is what I told her.

1. Students are incurring more debt to attend college (but taking on debt correlates with degree attainment = better living through debt)
2. More and more students are having college plans disrupted by change in parents income status due to recession
3. Working more hours while attending college
4. Part-time jobs even harder to find due to recession
5. Stress levels increasing for students and families
6. Students use of counseling services at an all-time high
7. More students than ever are attending more than one college to attain a BA degree (over 60%). The transfer phenomenon is now normative.
8. More and more students are “swirling” meaning they simultaneously attend more than one institution
9. The demand for higher ed has never been greater (due to the recession—the old jobs without college training are gone, gone, gone)
10. Much greater competition to get into the majors/fields of choice: e.g. health care fields
11. Biggest growth “change” area of enrollment patterns is dramatic increases in community college and proprietary school enrollments
12. Median age of students attending open admissions institutions is plummeting
13. More and more students can no longer afford the residential college experience; so biggest gains in enrollment are in commuter student populations.
14. Students know that employer recruitment visits to campus career centers are down, down, down
15. Students know that the government is hiring so public service jobs are more attractive than ever; also these are the only jobs left in America with defined benefit pension plans
16. Students know it is going to take a long time for the job market to improve so many are planning to pile on more debt and just go straight to graduate school
17. Other students are planning to get off the rat race, chill out, and delay entry into full adulthood
18. The military is still the employer of last resort but standards even for it are now more competitive, except for the infantry
19. More and more “veterans” will be starting or returning to college
20. Growth rates will all be dominated by formerly “minority” status students

So, have students had enough change lately? You bet. No wonder some of them do things to try to blow this off or ignore it. But most can’t even afford to do that. What would be on your list, missing from mine?

2010

An Unplanned Opportunity for Community

1-4-10

It was the week before Christmas 2009 and all over my mountain top in western North Carolina snow and then freezing rain and sleet and then more snow fell. It was a hard, frozen snow. The most we had had since The East Coast Blizzard of 1993. And our roads were not plowed for four days (due to State budget cut backs on personnel and equipment). I live with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, literally on the top of a mountain from which it is four miles down steep winding roads to civilization.

So we were presented with four days of opportunity for unprecedented community with our neighbors. Betsy suggested asking one neighbor couple over for dinner and they came. We had been wanting to do this for months and work and life were always interfering. And we got to know and discover them so much better in just one long relaxing evening.

And we went to a neighborhood party, given by a same sex couple, the first in our immediate community. We learned so much about their talents, a neat business they were starting, their challenges and progress in remodeling their home. And we were reminded of how many legal privileges Betsy and I enjoy but not all of our neighbors are accorded such equal treatment under the law.

And I discovered a neighbor who has lung cancer and desperately needed to get down off the mountain top for a radiation treatment. I was the only person he and his wife knew that not only had a four-wheel drive vehicle, but one with four "studded" snow tires. So I totally changed the plan I had established for my day to take this couple down off the mountain top, and succeeded in doing so.

The differences in my and my wife's daily rhythm took a positive cumulative effect and almost like a child who got to miss school, I became thankful for this unplanned opportunity for community.

It also made me think of how so many characteristics now of the contemporary college and university work against community; prevent us from having a meal with "neighbors" that we intend to get to know better but never really do; prevent us from experiencing people who are different from us, right on our own campus; and prevent us from reaching out and discovering someone who really could use some assistance from us if only we would notice the need and offer to respond.

This sets me to thinking about what kinds of external factors can and should interrupt our daily rhythms to provide opportunities for unplanned community. And why we couldn't just be more intentional about trying to create more opportunities for community, under our control, and not forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control.

Wouldn't you make your campus just a little bit better this year than you will find it on January 4, 2010, if you intentionally create more opportunities for community within your sphere of influence, no matter what size that may be?

Happy Valley is Not the Norm

1-6-10

On Christmas Eve, as I was shoveling snow from my western North Carolina mountain top driveway, I was also entertained by my faithful NPR, and, in particular, an Ira Glass segment from "This American Life" focusing on the binge drinking culture at Pennsylvania State University.

Even for a seasoned higher education administrator such as myself, with over three decades experience at a similar type institution—i.e. residential, Division I intercollegiate revenue sports, with a strong social fraternity and sorority culture, I was amazed at what was reported.

I recommend your listening to this segment on-line, in spite of its graphic reportage of students so inebriated they are publicly urinating on the lawns of neighbors; and featuring such priceless anecdotes as a female student reporting she and her friends "weren't slutty" until they came to college; and another female student who is joined by her parents for her twenty-first birthday drinking celebration, all gathered to get drunk.

I was reminded of a famous Pennsylvania resident, former US President Dwight Eisenhower, who warned prophetically in the 1950's of what he described as a threat to our nation's future from the "military industrial complex." And, of course, many commentators have since added that what we developed was also the "military-industrial-university complex." And now what I proclaim that we obviously have in such research university settings is an "alumni-big time sports-alcohol industry- college student dependent small business-higher education administration complex! And this "complex" is in collusion to enable these late adolescent adult world avoidance behaviors (along with a lot of adult alums who come to join and further enable them).

NPR, thankfully, has a huge listening audience. And I couldn't help but hope that many of them were sophisticated enough to know that what was described as "student life" in Penn State's "Happy Valley" is not what characterizes "student life" on the majority of US colleges and universities. The majority of students in our country are not drinking to excess, partying Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. The majority can't afford to do so for one thing, do not attend Division I institutions, are not members of Greek letter social organizations, do not live on college campuses, and have to work so many long hours at part and full-time jobs in addition to their college class time and work, that they couldn't possibly experience college as Ira Glass saw it at a Penn State football weekend. That's the big picture.

And we need to remind our fellow citizens of what the reality is, and ourselves too. Happy Valley is not the norm.

Happy Anniversary to My Adult Self

1-11-10

Today as I write this blog, January 10, 2010, I reflect, that this was the first day of the rest of my life that really matters, back on January 10, 1967. Forty-three years ago tonight I "cleared" in to my new base in the US Air Force, Shaw AFB, South Carolina. I had arrived at a place I had great hesitation about coming to, a base in the "Deep South" which I thought would be like a foreign country from my vantage point as a young, white, "Yankee," liberal, arriving about two years after the Civil and Voting Rights Acts. But if I hadn't come to South Carolina that night, I never would have discovered my true vocation.

How do our students "discover their true vocations"? Mine was largely due to circumstances beyond my control. But I had taken maximum advantage of opportunities I had been previously offered to some day be able to take maximum advantage of circumstances beyond my control. That's what we have to prepare our students to be able to do.

In my case, I had been the recipient of a fine liberal arts education at a small liberal arts college (Marietta). Then, to escape the draft, I decided to go to graduate school. But I was drafted in grad school anyway, and hastily finished an MA in American Studies before being voluntarily inducted into the US Air Force. Because I had that liberal arts masters degree, the Air Force had to give me special consideration for a duty assignment. And they needed psychiatric social workers due to the Vietnam War buildup and I became one.

After being sent to my permanent duty assignment in SC, and on base less than 24 hours, my squadron commander called me in and told me that he had been reviewing my record and had discovered that I had more education than anyone in my squadron except the physicians. In turn, that made him give me a direct order to become a college teacher in the University of South Carolina Extension Division.

I explained to my commander that I was not a college teacher and had no teaching experience anywhere. He said that was alright and that the Air Force believed in having people like me "volunteer" to perform "public service."

I was 22 years old. No one had ever asked me to "volunteer" before, let alone perform a "public service."

So two days later, on Saturday, January 13, 1967, I had appointments with multiple personnel at the University of South Carolina in nearby Columbia, which my commander had the Base Education Office arrange for me. To my amazement, I was approved to teach five different courses on an adjunct basis, four in history and one in sociology.

Two weeks later I started my first college teaching, at a small, rural, open admissions regional campus of USC in a similarly small, rural textile town, Lancaster, S.C. Initially, I was very nervous. I taught on a Friday night and was so nervous I couldn't eat before class. I looked and was younger than many of my students, and had no hair. After about six weeks I noticed my nervousness subsiding and then disappearing altogether.

And I realized that I was looking forward to teaching that class more than anything else I could even imagine doing. Why? Because college teaching, I had discovered, gave me the opportunity to do the four things I loved most to do, and be paid an honest wage for doing honest work. What four things? Talking, reading, writing, and helping people.

And that's what I do today, all thanks to the US Air Force, and not the career planning I should have had in college but didn't because it wasn't provided by any college at that time. Colleges didn't believe that that was something they needed to provide for students! We have come a long way baby. Happy Anniversary adult John.

The Great Recession's Toll on Our Students

1-13-10

Many of our students have never had it easy in college and it has always been a struggle. But my sources at the front tell me that things have never been as bad for students in contemporary higher education as they are now during the "Great Recession." And, of course, we are having our own very distracting problems, particularly with the impact of institutional budget reductions and with the impact of the Recession on our own loved ones outside our work in higher education. In my case, I have a brother who has been unemployed since last February and a sister whose job was reduced from full-time to half-time, but none of her expenses. But what about our students?

These are some of my thoughts, concerns, perhaps. Please compare these with yours:

- under more stress than ever (implications for demand on your counselors and all helping professionals)
- huge family pressures due to recession
- more need than ever for financial support and jobs on campus and connections to off-campus jobs
- going to have to ramp up Financial Aid offices and stop running them like sweat shops with all info now just on the web
- need more help in career planning—many of the old jobs aren't going to be there anymore, vocational landscape is changing—implications for staffing of career centers—students need more help in vocational decision making
- students being drawn to public sector work—the government is hiring! Greater appeal of service professions especially teaching. (Raises questions of who is going to produce all the teachers? Universities haven't stepped up which is a reason why in number of states community colleges are being authorized to offer teaching degrees). These careers have the only defined benefit plans left.
- students struggling to figure out what should their values be and many taking multiple gap years to do so: the quintessential American chase for riches has proved to be ephemeral
- students need us more than ever: they can't function in the knowledge economy without us
- implication: they can even less afford the typical first year with its Vampire Economics (August train wreck) and Curriculum Roulette (high probability of high DWFI grades in first year across sections)—means first year has to be shaken up
- higher education is going to have to be more focused on the public good vs emulating the culture of capitalism and the relentless pursuit of increased wealth
- going to have to be more connected to employers
- going to have to rethink our curriculum and how we prepare students particularly in fields that have caused our financial Tsunami: banking, finance, real estate, auditing, insurance, law, public policy, and government service. Just think of the implications alone for the MBA curricula!
- we have to reduce time to degree completion rates which means we have to accelerate the BA degree and produce a real "three year" degree.
- we must pay more attention to the increasing numbers of students who are arriving on our campuses who have sacrificed the most for other Americans, our recently discharged veterans, as well as active duty military. The time for counseling, advising and other forms of understanding and support for America's newest GI's is now. And, it is worthy to note that they also have other student transition needs because they also come to us as "new" students, transfers, sophomores, etc.

I think I am just glad I was an undergraduate student in decades past. I really didn't have to cope with any of these variables. Does this give me adequate capacity for empathy for my students today?

Check List for Starting a New Term

1-15-10

This blog is inspired by fact that I discovered last week that to start something properly, that I start repeatedly, I need a check list.

After a nice long holiday break, last week I had to take my first business trip by air. The flight was at a ghastly hour in the early morning and as I was half way down my mountain road to the airport, I realized I had left my wallet at home. So I had to turn around, race back up the mountain and get my wallet.

When I arrived at the airport, I found that that all important "hook" that is supposed to perch on top of your roller bag was gone. This was a near disaster. It meant that I now had to roll two bags, using both arms, through airports instead of hooking one on the other and greatly simplifying my movements.

On my return flights from this same trip last week, I left my priceless pocket calendar on an airplane; and I left a beautiful silk and cashmere scarf in an airport lounge. What is happening to me?

I decided that I have not been practicing one of the keys to success: using a check list. And I really should have been inspired to have been better organized because I had seen only three days before this trip, the incredible new film with George Clooney, "Up in the Air," about a metaphoric symbol for our times in the Great Recession: a man who aspires only to earn 10 million frequent flier miles on American Airlines as he flies from city to city earning his living by firing people at businesses whose managers have retained him to do the deed.

You'd think as a 3.5 million miler on my airline of choice that I would already have had at least a mental check list. Well, now I have a paper check list, just like the pilots that fly me, and I am going to use it prior to every departure. I am an adult. I learn from my experiences.

This has made me think: what kind of a check list do we need to start a new academic term?

More importantly, what kind of a check list do our students need? If you, my reader, are a college teacher, could you work with your students to make up a "check list" for them to complete to insure their success as they prepare to fly with you this term? Sure, you could. I hope you will. Otherwise, many of your students will be "up in the air" and not well grounded in your course where you want them to be.

MLK Day: What Does This Evoke for You?

1-19-10

I hope you were asking that of our students, and colleagues, on the 18th.

For me, it evokes the memory of actually hearing that speech, live, as it was delivered. I was driving my car on the Garden State Parkway in New Jersey, work commuting, in association with summer college job as a steelworker in a factory that made beer cans, summer of 1963. And when I heard Dr. King's voice ring out the spirit moved me off the highway and to the shoulder. I had to stop and just listen. I could not do that and drive. It was unforgettable. If you haven't ever played the speech back for your students, you should.

The day evokes for me his murder, on a Thursday, in April 1968. I taught a class the next night, a Friday night, at a regional campus of the University of South Carolina and that particular night I set aside what I had planned to do on the syllabus, and instead performed a series of readings from Dr. King's works and discussed these with the students. You could have heard a pin drop.

That was also the same semester that the very first Black student came to that campus. He was all alone—the only one. His name was "Mr. Small"; he was actually, literally, small in stature, but huge in courage and in significance. A week later my dean called me in and told me that a number of my students had complained to him about my readings from those works. But other students had the opposite reaction. There often is no powerful learning without taking some risks. And this is exactly what academic freedom is for.

For many years, my state resisted declaring this as a holiday. I so wanted to join the union.

Now I live in a small North Carolina town which has a MLK vigil, a candlelight procession, a special celebratory ceremony and presentation.

We need to remind our students, and our colleagues, that one person, one leader, can and does make a difference. And that the vision this leader called for is not yet fulfilled. And that's the most important reason we are in this student success work.

Just Say Anything

1-20-10

Some years ago there was a film about a student struggling to decide what he would say in a commencement address to his fellow students. He was advised to "just say anything." That is my thought precisely about what to say to our students regarding this extraordinary tragedy unfolding in Haiti.

No matter what our subject or role with students, we must say something. This is an extraordinary moment to bring into relief the vast difference in quality of lives between American college students, no matter what their means, and the suffering people of Haiti.

We have so many choices for how to approach this. One that comes to mind to me is to go beyond analysis of who Haiti became to be the poorest sovereign nation in the western hemisphere. Indeed, it is important for students to understand the role of the US as one of the imperial powers responsible for the culture of this nation (in addition to France). But what strikes me as particularly relevant are all the cries this year from the right about too much government in the US. The lack now of essentially any government in the failed state that is Haiti poses an extraordinary teachable moment for students to examine why human society needs government and what are or should be the minimum essentials of what all governments should provide.

Thank goodness, many of our students will do more than many of us; they will do more than "talk" about this. They will act and go to Haiti to contribute what they have the most of: time, energy, passion, strength, compassion. The impact on our students will be profound.

In the meantime: Just say anything!

Relevance: The Week That Was

1-25-10

Some years ago my wife and I had moved to a new community and she was shopping for a church. I went with her a few times but couldn't stand it. It struck me as if the well-educated and likable priest, whom I knew knew there was an outside world, must be assuming his flock did not want to hear of the outside world. This made me think at the time of how many of our students may often wonder the same thing about us academics, where to many of us the word "relevance" is anathema. I am reminded of this matter of relevance in the context of the week we have just been through.

For those of us who think of the classroom as a laboratory, or at least a way of connecting our students to the outside world in order to better understand and cope with it, this past week certainly presented teachable opportunities. And, for any of us who missed it, there is still time. There are so many opportunities to use relevance to create powerful learning, and few weeks with more fresh meat than the one we have just had.

This was the week that: 1) the Democrats lost their "safe" seat in Massachusetts, a citadel of previous Democratic strength; 2) the health insurance reform bill was derailed and millions of Americans lost their chance to have health insurance, surely not for decades now; 3) the President unleashed a populist blast against the bankers and fat cats of Wall Street; 4) that and the health insurance bill demise let to the tanking of the stock market as corporate America watched the biggest corporate welfare bill in history go down the tubes; and 5) the Supreme Court put American government at all levels on sale.

Surely any discipline could relate to any or all of the above. We could examine the math of it; the ethics of it; the history of it; the politics of it; the justice of it. But many of us academics will pass on this moment, some of us out of despair. Our hopes for a new civil rights bill are dashed and we shall adjust by crawling under a rock for a while. Like many of the "haves" who voted in Massachusetts, we too are among the haves; and we are resigned that so many of our fellow citizens do not really want all to have access to health care for we feel it will cost us to provide for others. I hope our students will demand that we help them think through the implications of what this is costing us all now; for as long as all do not have equal access to health care, or as we define that in the US, health "insurance," we will have a markedly different quality of life and set of values, and certainly not justice for all.

The New Normal: The Transfer Experience

1-27-10

I write this blog as I fly to a conference hosted each year in Dallas, by the University of North Texas's National Institute for the Study of the Transfer Students. This will be my first time as an attendee, and it is overdue. This conference is about improving the success of transfer students.

Like all educators, I am shaped by my prior life's experiences. These give me values, knowledge, interest, prejudice, focus, motivation. They shape the way I see and understand anything. And, in that vein, although I have taught thousands of "transfer" students, I was never one myself. And that is a limitation. So why am I concerned about this now and trying to learn more about it?

Because the transfer experience is now the "new normal." Just over 60% of all currently enrolled college students seeking a BA degree will have attended more than one institution and then "transferred" by the time their BA is awarded.

And because most institutions and educators really know very little about this experience and these students. We just haven't taken the time to seriously study this.

But we want these students to come to us; we want their money.

And we want this even though many of us have very strong prejudices about transfer students: they are inferior to "native" students; they are less well prepared; their success rates for BA attainment are lower; they bring more "problems" with them. Such are our beliefs, regardless of whether or not they are supported by any evidence.

I care about this issue because unless we pay more attention to these students, learn more about them, offer them more intentional support, we cannot possibly achieve President Obama's goals to increase BA attainment rates in our country.

And I care about these students for a very practical professional reason, namely, I am the CEO of a small non-profit organization that is engaging in a national pilot this year to help campuses conduct a self study to develop an action plan to improve transfer student performance. This process is known as Foundations of Excellence ® Transfer Focus. We have six four-year colleges undertaking this pilot this year and will add a cohort of two-year colleges next year. For more information see www.fyfoudations.org.

Another thing many of us higher educators know nothing about is a sub set of the transfer experience known as "reverse transfer." This refers to students transferring from baccalaureate level (and higher) institutions to community colleges after receipt of an advanced degree. For example, it was reported in The Chronicle a few years ago, that one of the campuses of Northern Virginia Community College had 350 PhD's on its faculty and about 500 in its student body: reverse transfers

So, for me, the transfer population is my new frontier. I have so much more to learn about them and therefore I suspect that I am in good company with you. Please join me. And then let's do something to more intentionally promote their success.

Blog: The Art of Complimenting

1-29-10

As a college professor of four decades I have attended my share of “faculty development” activities. And I have always agreed (rather than being offended by) with the notion that we do need to be “developed,” and continually so. I was not “born” a college teacher; I was “made” one, and largely by the professional development, support, encouragement and innovation of my employer: the University of South Carolina.

But in all the “faculty development” workshops that I ever participated in, led myself, or have even heard about, I don’t recall one on the topic of “the Art of Complimenting.” I think it is an art. And I think we need it (we faculty, because many of us are not gifted in this art, and because our students need it both for affirmation and motivation).

This blog is prompted by fact that this past weekend I was in a conference call with three other people, one of whom a woman who has known and worked with me on the national level for almost a decade. She made a sincere comment that I was “charming” but in the context of the subject we were talking about, I needed to be more than that! Agreed.

I think what she was probably referring to is that I love to compliment others. And I have worked and practiced at it for years. I enjoy discovering peoples’ qualities that cry out to me for a compliment. I can tell by their reactions that many people must not be complimented often or enough. I found this particularly to be true with my students. Instead of being in an environment where they were affirmed for what they knew and did, and could do, they were constantly being reminded by powerful people of all they didn’t know and couldn’t do, at least not yet.

My own self-reflection on this “art” has led me to conclude that I really started thinking seriously about this as a part of my own personal intellectual quest for “the truth.” It was in my junior year at Marietta College that I was taking a political philosophy course from R.S. Hill who had us reading Plato’s Republic, one of the truly most influential books I have ever read.

I learned from Plato’s rendering of Socrates pedagogy for discovering the truth, that you have to interact with other people and discover in each their “half-truths”; that there is something of worth, knowledge and dignity in virtually everyone else. And once you find those half-truths, surely there is something there worth complimenting. That became intentionally one of my most characteristic teaching pedagogies.

Another lesson I learned from The Republic, was that the most important question I could be asking as a student, and lifelong learner and journey man through life is: “what is justice?”—the subject for another blog.

I think I should try to write something more extensive on the Art of Complimenting and hope I will.

The Merits of Being Stranded

2-1-10

I write this blog as I am "stranded" in an airport hotel for two nights, not home with my wife on our beautiful North Carolina mountain top as I want to be. This is as a result of my home airport of Asheville, NC being closed by a winter snow storm preventing me from getting in.

My challenge in addition to the expected travel hassles is somehow to make the most of this unplanned for adversity. I am reminded of the thinking and writing of my late, good friend, Al Siebert, who wrote and spoke about the so-called "survivor personality". Basically, this is a fundamental trait of resiliency and adaptability. As I have been making decisions about how I would use my stranded time, my thoughts have turned to wondering how I am different/similar to the behavior of first-year college students when they are stranded?!

Al Siebert's work on the "survivor personality" reminds me also of my friend Donald Lifton's research on "hardiness". Don is a Business professor at Ithaca College that has been exploring a trait in college students for over fifteen years, which he describes as "hardiness". He is particularly interested in the correlation of "hardiness" in first-year students and the correlation with persistence in college.

So my thoughts have turned, perhaps to a fantasy, about what might be the value of contriving certain experiences where our first-year students might find themselves "stranded", i.e. cut off from the ones they love, or at least normally associate socially with, cut off from the conventional surroundings. What would they do? How would they spend their time? How could we use this as an opportunity for reflection, self-appraisal, goal setting, decision making, who knows? Whatever?

I am reminded too of my son's experience on an Outward Bound expedition. He was a high school senior and on this trip to the Everglades, he and the other students were each left totally alone for about a day, with absolutely none of the gadgets for contemporary distraction and mental occupation: no phones, radios, Ipods, music players of any kind. And they were given a note pad and asked to write their reflections. The experience for my son was quite transformative. Most notably, he discovered silence and its therapeutic effects.

Personally, I believe that the first year of college is an extraordinary "foundational" experience, both for college, and for life.

So, I leave you with these questions: what could you/we do to make our first-year students better "survivors" when life has a way of serendipitously "stranding" them? Make them more "hardy" in their all important temperaments? The knowledge transmission, acquisition, creation, discovery process is, of course, the preeminent academic mission. But how can that knowledge from the beginning college experience be used to increase "success when stranded?" Hundreds of thousands of college educated citizens, like my brother for instance, are asking themselves such questions in the Great Recession, which has "stranded" so many of our higher education graduates.

I know that my college experience is helping me cope with being stranded, but I would still rather not be stranded. I am coping better though because I am "grounded" and I have college to thank for much of that.

Receiving is as Important as Giving: As in Compliments!

2-4-10

Recently I wrote a blog on the art of complimenting. One of my readers thoughtfully wrote me and suggested I should now do one of the art of receiving compliments, and responding to them. Hmm, I may really be on to something here.

As a child, I was taught that it was more important to give than to receive. But, as a young professor at the University of South Carolina, in the training they provided for first-time, first-year seminar, University 101 instructors, I learned about the importance of both giving and receiving feedback and its relationship to improving student learning. And once I understood this, it made me a much better teacher.

I realize it is possible that some educators may react that students aren't really qualified to make a professional judgment of their educators, whether positive or negative. I hope you won't react that way. We educators know that we can influence student and colleague behaviors by the feedback we give them. We also need to remember that the feedback we receive, particularly the compliments, can influence our behavior too.

So, about receiving compliments, I think it is all part of the need to be intentional about seeking and then responding to feedback. In responding, I don't think we should debate, deny, or defend it (ourselves). Instead we need to try to appreciate and understand it. And then decide what, if anything, we are going to do with it.

It is especially empowering to students when we come back into a setting with them and tell them: "You told me that when I do XXXX, you really enjoy that and learn from it, and so I am going to do that more often, for example, right now! Thank you so much for helping me understand how to better reach you." Learning is such an interconnected, inter-dependent process. By giving and receiving feedback, including compliments, we continue our own learning. I think we need to acknowledge this, how important it is, how good it feels, and what positive uses we can make of it.

How lucky and privileged we are to be in a profession where our students and colleagues have good reasons to compliment us. As Thoreau once said, in contrast: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." The art of both giving and receiving compliments helps ensure that we do not lead lives of quiet desperation, in and out of the academy.

Keeping A Stiff Upper Lip: How Truthful to Be with our Students?

2-6-10

Just what is this all about? What does "keeping a stiff upper lip" (implying putting a better spin on things than you really perceive them to be) have to do with being truthful to our students? For that matter, how could we consider anything other than being totally truthful with our students?

I never thought I would be asking these questions again. "Again," because I asked them during my second year of college teaching and thought when I got beyond that, I would never have to ask them again. Quick context: I was an adjunct instructor on a small regional campus of the University of South Carolina. The year was 1968. The Tet offensive had shocked the American people with how ferocious our enemy could be in Vietnam after our being told for years we were "winning." My male students were losing their draft deferments if their GPA's fell below a "B" and I had a number of them begging me for better grades to keep them out of Vietnam. Then Martin Luther King was murdered. And riots followed. Our country was coming apart at the seams. And I was on active duty in the US Air Force as a psychiatric social worker.

One evening before my class, the campus Dean called me into my office and told me he had been receiving complaints from some of my students that I was "anti-war" and a "n----- lover." I acknowledged that I indeed love people of different hues from mine and had devoted my class immediately following the assassination of Dr. King to a reading from his works. And I explained that I was not "anti-war" and, in fact, had volunteered for my own military service. But, I also explained that what I was doing was explaining the truth to my students, as I saw it, in answer to their many questions.

The Dean explained to me that I really shouldn't be so truthful; that the male students especially really didn't need to know the truth because they were going to be drafted anyway and sent to Vietnam and it would be wrong to disillusion them about the sacrifices they were going to have to make. He went on to explain that because of South Carolina's long history of discrimination against Blacks, and their resulting inferior education, that their failure rate on the Selective Service examinations was very high, thus causing a much higher draft rate for white males. He urged me just not to be truthful about how unnecessary this war was and how badly it was being waged.

I did not take his advice. And began looking for another location for my college teaching.

But here I am now in 2010. And not coincidentally, just after the devastating quake in Haiti, and all the press descriptions of Haiti as a "failed state," there are more and more references to the US as a "failing state." This is due especially to the paralysis of the Congress, where even the party with the largest majorities in recent history still cannot achieve the passage of major legislation. We seemingly cannot come to terms with our greatest problems. And the hue and cry about our federal deficit is rising, just at the time we need more government spending to stimulate employment and relief. Millions of Americans are suffering. I have a 58 year old brother who has been unemployed for a year; a sister who was cut from full-time to half-time employment; and a nephew with seven children who lost his job in November. We all have stories like this. Our politicians just don't seem to get it. They are not hungry. They have the best health insurance and pension plans money can buy—our money.

I am not ready to join the Tea Partiers. But what should we be telling our students? They are REALLY worried, even the best of the partiers among them. Should we keep a stiff upper lip? Urge confidence, hope, optimism? Put this in perspective and remind them this is the great country that fought World War II, conquered past scourges like polio, survived the Great Depression? Our students can't relate to any of this. All most of them know is what came in on their most recent text messages; and the fact that they and their families are scared to death about the directions they see before them.

I do believe we should be talking about these issues with our students. I hope you will be honest with them. I believe that educators should be teaching a "learned optimism." And I feel for you in terms of how difficult that has become to do, honestly.

What's Your Big Idea?

2-10-10

I write this as I fly to an annual meeting I organized initially 29 years ago, and first hosted in February of 1982, what is now known as the Conference on The First-Year Experience. This year more than a thousand higher educators will gather, in spite of this winter of all winters, and in spite of our terrible economy, to once again come together to learn from each other how to better help struggling first-year college students be successful. And since then we have organized these conferences in many cities and countries and more than 100,000 educators have participated. Now, the concept of "first-year experience" is ubiquitous in both the higher ed lexicon and practice. This is no longer a "big idea", but it once was. And, it was my idea, one of my few original creations in life. What's your big idea?

This notion of "the big idea": let me report how I came upon this. Almost a decade ago I met an outstanding foundation executive, as good as they come in the genre, Susan Conner, former Executive Vice President of Lumina Foundation for Education. Susan spoke often in my presence about the search for "the big idea" and she could and did constantly name people who had shown her "the big idea". This made me think much more intentionally about "the big idea". That was a real gift from her to me.

Somebody else's big ideas are all around us. Think of the roller bag I am hauling with me today out to Denver. Why didn't I invent the roller bag? What a back saver? Or the bottled water that we all pay more for now than we do the same quantities of petroleum products, or alcohol! Who would have ever thought that in developed countries people would pay dearly for water?

My big idea came in 1981. I had just been promoted to full professor at the University of South Carolina and now I had to decide what I was going to do for the rest of my life—i.e. now that I was fully professionally grown up. And I was trying to decide if I was going to continue to direct a first-year seminar, our fabled University 101 course. I decided that if that work were going to remain energizing of me I needed to think of some way to create professional development opportunities for me in this field. But there was no professional literature about this curricular innovation. And there were no conferences where I could learn from fellow educators new ideas to enrich this unique course genre. So I decided to organize a conference to teach myself. If I could learn, others could too. Then I followed that idea with one to create a national higher education center to provide "resources" to educators wanting to improve the beginning college experience. I was on a roll. And I don't need to further enumerate my big ideas.

My colleagues who know me best have always said: "If John can do it, anyone can." And they are absolutely correct. So look around you. What's your big idea for helping our students? What have you tried that no one else has and realized positive results for students and educators? There is no monopoly on good ideas. They don't have to come from high status places and high status people. And there is huge demand for big ideas. Look at all the problems we struggle with in higher education and the broader society. Surely there is room for your big ideas too.

Wintering into Wisdom

2-11-10

One of my greatest intrinsic satisfactions in my 44 years as a higher educator is the wonderful people I have met, learned from, worked with, enjoyed, and loved. One of my all time favorites is Betty Siegel, President Emerita of Kennesaw State University. A few years ago Betty started talking to me about her notion of her “wintering into wisdom.” At first I didn’t like the sound or thought of it for I feared I was not long to follow. It wasn’t the “wisdom” I feared at all, but the “winter.”

And now in this winter of all winters, I am OK with this notion of wintering into wisdom. Too bad we are in a society that worships youth and writes off so many of its older citizens as out of touch. But I am persuaded that I really do have things figured out, at least as far as it goes in the academy and accomplishing undergraduate student success—and some outside in real life things too. And this is a good place to be at. So I am just going to own it.

But it also occurs to me that “wintering into wisdom” is something that our own college students can achieve before they leave us. I am reminded of my younger son, Jonathan. When he was a senior at Elon University, he spent a very meaningful winter term in Costa Rica. He was very moved by this beautiful country, with the healthiest democracy in the region; a country that tops all the rankings for happiest people in the world; and the only country in the Caribbean and Central America that has the great distinction of never having been invaded by the US Marines in our gunboat diplomacy. In fact, there are some thinkers who correlate the happiness levels of the Costa Rican people with the total absence there of a military and hence expenditures of the military culture. Hmm, what are the implications of this for the US.

Back to the subject at hand: I remember my son telling me that while on this 3-4 week visit to Costa Rica he was also accompanied by a number of other younger undergraduates. He told me how embarrassed he was by seeing younger students than him who couldn’t hold their liquor in public, “particularly the girls” he said, who embarrassed him to be an American guest in this other country.

As I listened to him at the time, and recalled his own drinking to excess during a first college year winter term in Jamaica, I observed: well how interesting; my son has wintered into wisdom on this winter term.

I do believe that as our undergraduates pass through our culture, to the extent we touch them at all in any profound ways, it is possible for them to winter into wisdom.

So what are you doing to facilitate for your students their own wintering into wisdom before you send them forth?

What Do Students Really Need?

2-22-10

I find myself constantly asking this question: what do students really need? By that I mean, to be successful in college, to learn, to achieve their goals, to grow, to be able to ultimately better serve our democracy. I ask this question most often in specific institutional contexts.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to have a tour on a brand-new campus, and one that is now a 100% commuter campus, but is going to be opening residence halls. Talk about a culture changer....?!

None of the residences under construction were ready yet for prospective student residents to view where they might be living. So, the college had created a "model" suite to show exactly the dimensions, furnishings, facilities, of a two bedroom "suite." What a neat idea, I thought.

In each "suite" there was a common area that included a kitchen. The kitchen component included a large refrigerator, (as large as the one in my kitchen), a dishwashing machine, a stove, and microwave oven. I do not remember if there was a disposal and if there was a trash compactor! And directly across from the kitchen area was a living room seating area in which a 15" flat screen cable TV will be provided in each suite.

Well, you could have blown me over with a feather. What extraordinary living circumstances—but only from my perspective perhaps. And I haven't even mentioned the elaborate security and other protective devices. This college has really gone all out to provide most all the amenities a contemporary student would want—or at least I would hope so. They are certainly being "supportive" in that respect.

But there was part of me that inevitably remembered my own "dorms" in the 1960's. No private rooms. No carpeting. No TV's in the room. Microwave ovens and flat screens and cable TV did not exist. And there were other parts of me that I found were asking:

1. Will all these creature comforts really produce better students, better writers, thinkers, problem solvers?
2. What is it that students really need in terms of support during college?
3. Will these facilities yield more satisfied students?
4. Will these facilities further encourage students to think of themselves as "consumers" to be catered to?
5. What kinds of support would be analogous for their needs in the curriculum, for their intellectual development?
6. Can any college possibly manage a comparable level of support for the curricular objectives of higher education as we now provide in such living amenities?
7. Will this level of creature comfort provide us with better graduates, employees, leaders, parents, citizens?
8. What would happen if we didn't do this, provide such amenities? Are there other strategies we could resort to to remain competitive?

So many questions. So few answers, at least initially. The jury is out. But one thing I do know: these student residences are gorgeous and some very lucky students will get to call them home. I hope they appreciate what the preceding generation is now handing them.

Surely, They Have to Know

3-3-10

I realize that many higher educators don't believe that students really keep up with the news. They are involved in other more essential tasks like their full or part-jobs, relationships, then school, etc. But I believe that students are like the rest of us and they just sort of absorb the culture.

So, they have to be feeling that consumer confidence has again taken a precipitous decline.

They have to be aware of the continuing high unemployment and that this week over one million Americans have just exhausted their unemployment benefits and that one lone Republican Senator has put a hold on legislation that would extend those benefits.

They have to be aware that once they leave school they will roll off their college student health insurance and/or their parents' group coverage, for those whose parents still have that. So on some level they have to have some interest in and awareness of the fact that their government is in total paralysis about acting to reform health insurance.

They have to know people in their own families, neighbors, friends who are unemployed, exhausting their savings. This has to make them wonder if they are going to find employment at all let alone fitting for college graduates. So they have to be asking just what is the purpose of college anyway, if not to get me a better job.

They have to have noticed the excitement that swept many college campuses, or high schools just one fall ago when one person moved them to actually think about "hope." And now they have to note that, for the most part, that "hope" has vanished.

They have to have known and understood all along what we woke up today to read as headlines in our papers, however we read them: "Teen pot and alcohol use increases". Not only do they have to have known this because they have observed and lived this, they have to be sympathetic to an attitude that promotes hedonism as an alternative to despair.

No matter what your subject, no matter what your role on college campuses, your students have to be looking at YOU for some hint of possible directions for them to be thinking about, in this new normal of very few inspiring examples—on either side of the political house, or in the examples of corporate leadership as evidenced by how companies are treating both employees and customers. YOU are the last resort for inspiration. YOU are the last seat on the bus.

Campus as a Microcosm: We Must do Better

3-8-10

It has long been asserted that college and university campuses are, for better or worse, a microcosm of our larger society. They reflect our values, aspirations, social classes, problems, and more. But at present, I am hoping that we are actively striving for our campuses NOT to be a microcosm. I think we owe this to our impressionable students. Let me elaborate.

Over the past two decades a leading indicator and symbol for our society—and hence campuses—is our government. And it has become more fractured, myopic, and dysfunctional by the day. Even though we recently had a presidential election in which the presidency, and both houses of Congress, were won by substantial majorities of one party, that party cannot govern. It cannot realize its major legislative goals. It cannot keep its implied promises to the voters. It cannot achieve even temporary consensus to significantly address many of the country's most pressing problems. Shame on the Democrats. It is badly fractured and not really one party at all. As for the opposition party, its views and objectives are really driving the whole political process. The Republicans, in effect, are still running the country. They are successfully preventing millions of Americans from having pre-existing health conditions be a grounds for denial of what ought to be a basic American civil right: a right to health insurance (in lieu of a right to health care—there is a huge difference!). Elected members of both parties are incredibly selfish and don't hesitate to take positions for the good of only a small minority of the populace. Witness, Independent Lieberman holding up the health care debate not so long ago; Representative Stupak holding up health insurance reform for 320,000,000 Americans over a religiously driven issue, which theoretically should be separate from a governmental policy deliberation. Senator Ben Nelson single handedly cut a deal for special reimbursement for Medicaid reimbursement for only his state. And Senator Bunning singlehandedly held up a vote on extending unemployment insurance for hundreds of thousands of desperately needy out-of-work Americans, including my brother.

So what's the scene on our campuses? How do we show our students we do or do not come together for the common good? Do people of diametrically opposing views still treat each other with civility and dine and drink together—like our elected officials used to do? Are our student senates, our faculty senates, our staff councils, our department meetings, any more functional than our national leadership policy making bodies? Can we still achieve consensus without acrimony? Can we achieve some kind of moral center and focus that is still willing to extend opportunities for those who are less fortunate?

I believe we can and still do this. I hope we will strive to do so even more intentionally. My own college days are a constant reminder to me that I learned all about how organizations work, or don't work; how power is allocated and used; how decisions are made; how change is promoted or obstructed—I learned all this from trying to effect change through student government in my little liberal arts college. Our students are and can learn the same today. What are we teaching them? What could/should we be teaching them? Right now, at least from my vantage point on top of a North Carolina mountain, the only hope in the short term, is for positive change on the very local level, such as an individual college campus.

How Students are Meeting Hard Times

3-10-10

When I blog I try to have some semblance of an original idea or take on something. But not in this one. My sole purpose is to call my readers' attention to an article written by my wife. This piece is entitled "Collegiate Dreams and Expectations Meet Hard Times" and it is a compassionate piece about how our students hopes and dreams are colliding with current realities, and how the students do and can cope— and how educators can help them cope.

The author is Betsy Barefoot and her piece is found in the Journal of College and Character, Volume II, No. 1, February 2010. I commend it to you.

Betsy asks: "What keeps students aiming high, even in hard times?" And she argues the following:

1. They maintain a dream, somehow.
2. They harness inner strength and faith in themselves.
3. They seek help.
4. And they help others.
5. And they learn from their past.
6. They must manage their available financial resources, even though many of them have no previous experience or opportunity to have done so.

She argues that we have an obligation, and the ability and the opportunity to help them do these things. I find her paradigm very clear, and useful for what we must help them do. We can't do these things for them. But we can show them the way and support them, challenge them, question them, as they move through this laboratory for real life we know as the college experience.

What My Father Wanted Me to do in College

3-15-10

When I set out for college in 1961 as a seventeen year old, already very homesick kid, there were only two things that my father really wanted me to do in college—beyond going to class that is: 1) get on the crew team and rowing; 2) join a fraternity.

His reasoning: well, he had been an outstanding high school and college varsity athlete and believed in the value of the experience for character development and learning of teamwork, etc. And I had never shown the slightest interest in athletics, and, in fact, the contrary, a pronounced aversion. But he thought crew might appeal to me because it was a "non-contact" sport, and because there were no heroes. Every "oarsman" was seamlessly blended with the others. There were no "standouts".

Secondly, the fraternal experience: well, Dad had done that too. And he also thought that would be very good for me. Why? Because he told me I would learn how America works, how it is run. He was referring, literally, to the fact that America as he knew it was run by former fraternity boys; and he saw the culture of the fraternity as being identical to the culture of for-profit corporations, which also ran America. So, he argued, joining a fraternity would be a perfect learning experience for me.

What did I do? What did he get of what he wanted? He got half. As Lyndon Johnson said, "Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all". He and I got crew. I was a junior varsity "lightweight" for two years. Then I decided I wanted to be a serious student. Crew was a jealous mistress who demanded fidelity and discipline. I couldn't do both so I quit the crew team. My father was broken hearted about this.

And what about the fraternal experience. I declined. I found abhorrent the "rush" practices I observed and wanted no part of such groups. I have often wondered what would have happened to me as a life course if I had joined. I received a bid from a group one of whose members who respected me and sought my brotherhood, went on to become a senior partner with Goldman Sachs. He was a year ahead of me. I wonder if he would have asked me to join him.

About 20 years after graduating from college I did join a fraternity, Delta Upsilon, at USC, a group I had been conned into serving as a faculty advisor. But that is another blog.

OK, if I had a son who was going to college today, what kind of group would I tell him to join, to learn how America is run and works? I had this opportunity in 1986 and 1994 when my two sons went to college. I did give them advice on what groups to join. And I urged both of them to join fraternities! Both did. One dropped out.

But I didn't urge them to do what I would recommend now: join a non-profit community organization. Get involved. Preferably, get on the board. Obtain the experience of having fiduciary responsibility for one of America's 1.75 million such groups. I have been on three of these in my career. Currently, I am chair of the Brevard Music Center Board of Trustees, which has responsibility for an elite, highly selective music training educational institution for gifted young musicians. We don't have any college students on our board. I wish we did. It would be a great learning experience for them.

They would see how adult, professional, leadership groups work. How decisions are made. How visions are developed and pursued. How strategic planning is done. How succession is planned for and executed. How power is allocated and used. All kinds of things. So much could be learned.

Encourage Your Students to Make Their Wishes Known

3-17-10

I bet some of my readers are like me. They want this health insurance reform debate to just be over. Actually, I want more than that. I want a certain outcome of this debate. But I also want it to be over so we can move on as a country. It seems like our whole country is stalled; indecisive; just waiting for the white smoke to rise and see if we can get anything done. I hear anecdotes from all over that some of our campuses are paralyzed too. Don't know what their budgets are. So can't make decisions. Their legislatures won't, can't take action. Etc.

I think I would feel better if I knew that our students were "sounding" off. Actually, they don't "sound off" any more with their voices. They "send off" via electronic means. That's OK. The results could be the same. Our students had a tremendous impact on generating movement in the late 1960's and 70's. They helped end the war in Vietnam, for example. They made their campus cultures more open and inclusive. What difference might they make now if they let the Congressional representatives know what kind of insurance options they would like to have after they have realized their mortality and that therefore they are not going to live forever?

I would feel better if I just knew that our students were putting the pressure on their representatives to just vote this thing up or down. End the debate. Get on with it. So we could all move on. Wouldn't you feel better if you knew they were acting like stakeholders too?

I hope you will urge them to communicate. Everybody matters in this.

Child of the 60's

3-22-10

I admit it. I am a child of the 60's. Actually, I am a child of the 40's, but this well-established phrase is meant to suggest that those Americans who "came of age" in the 1960's, and who were shaped in some measureable ways by the convergence of the civil rights, women's, anti-war, and student protest movements, were to be henceforth known as a "child of the 60's".

Usually, the term was not meant necessarily to be one of respect. Sometimes it came to describe people who never really grew up, who never really joined the establishment; and/or who never gave up some brand of idealism coupled with some illustration of impracticability.

I admit it: I am a child of the 60's. I did join the Armed Forces; then after my tour of duty (in South Carolina) became a peace and civil rights activist, and a career higher educator. I admit and am proud of that many of my attitudes about the importance of paying more attention to a neglected minority, first-year college students, were indeed influenced by the convergence of all the movements I suggest above. For me, improving the first year of college has always been about, and still is: social justice.

I am thinking in this vein because this past weekend our Congress voted upon legislation, that will be the most important civil rights legislation since 1964 and 65. I am also recalling the influence of the 1960's because I spoke this past weekend at a conference at the University of South Carolina with the billing: "Student Activism, Southern Style: Organizing and Protest in the 1960's and 70's" organized by the USC Department of History. I will share in a future blog who this conference theme speaks to the origins of my career as an advocate for social, and educational, justice for beginning college students.

How Do We Help Students Understand the Significance of What Just Happened?

3-24-10

This weekend I was a speaker in a conference at the University of South Carolina entitled: "Student Activism, Southern Style: Organizing and Protest in the 1960's and 70's". My topic was how a student demonstration and, in reality, "rebellion", unleashed a chain of events that led to the creation of USC's now famous and widely replicated University 101 course and the series of influential Conferences on The First-Year Experience. I was on the same panel with a prominent 60's activist, and leader of SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Cleveland Sellers, now President of Voorhees College in South Carolina.

It was a moving experience for me to recall the tumult of the times and to reflect on what difference(s) the student activism of the 60's made. And, of equal importance, speaking on the very day the US House of Representatives took its historic vote on the health care insurance reform bill, this has led me to recall some of the great events and legislative acts of my lifetime and to reflect on what I understood at the time was the significance of what just happened. My thinking along these lines has led me to wonder what can, should we do to help our students reflect on the multiple meanings of the House vote on March 21, and how this will affect their lives. For me, I recalled:

1. Reading in August of 1964 The New York Times report of the North Vietnamese "attack" on the two US destroyers, the Turner, and the Maddox Joy, in the Gulf of Tonkin. I did not know then that that would be used as a pretext by the Johnson Administration to escalate the war in Vietnam which would ultimately lead to my induction into the US Armed Forces; and how that would bring me to South Carolina and to discover my calling as a higher educator;
2. The Civil Rights Act, also in the summer of 1964; and how that would change how we all live, work, play, and love together;
3. The Voting Rights Act; and how that would help make possible the election of Barack Obama in 2008.
4. The Medicare and Medicaid Acts of 1965 and how these would lay the basis for another civil rights bill which would not come to pass for another 45 years.

I look back and give thanks to my professors of those days for engaging us students in reflection on the significance of what had transpired. They put these events in context for us. They stimulated presentation of diverse perspectives on these events. They helped us develop a mental road map of what to look for ahead. They helped us place ourselves and our leaders on a historic continuum in America's search for social justice for all.

What are you going to do to stimulate the same kind of reflection for your students? What will you suggest that they read? Watch? Listen to?

Who will you suggest they talk with, listen to?

Who will you encourage them to write?

How will you help them prepare their own mental road maps for their lives ahead?

So Many Teachable Moments

3-26-10

During a period of my childhood, I lived in Canada where my father ran a Canadian subsidiary of an American company. I had the good fortune to go to a private boy's school which had many customs that would be unthinkable in contemporary American educational institutions. For example, we all wore uniforms; students were not allowed to enter the front doors of any buildings—only the “masters” could; and when a “master” entered a classroom, all students immediately stood as a form of respect. There was a pervading sense of order, stability, predictability.

Fast forward some fifty years for me, one of the laments I hear frequently from faculty who teach beginning college students is descriptions of classroom behavior which can be aptly summarized as “disrespectful”. There are many explanations for this diminished respect for authority, tracing origins to the Vietnam War era when an endless succession of events and culture changes epitomized a decline of respect for established institutions and individuals, from the Presidency, to corporations, the military, the Catholic church, etc.

It is no wonder that college students do not respect academic authority. They have spent 50% more time watching television by the time they reach age 18 than they have in formal school classrooms, and the idiot tube certainly doesn't teach respect. And most recently, the year in which our newest new students entered college, there have been all sorts of cultural events manifesting this decline of respect and decorum. No wonder they do not behave as we would like them to. Just witness over the past few months:

1. An elected member of Congress interrupting a speech by the President of the United States and calling him a liar;
2. Members of the US House of Representatives applauding verbal taunts from visitors in the gallery;
3. A demonstrator last weekend spitting on an African American Member of the House of Representatives, a celebrated former civil rights activist, who was also the recipient of the “n” word;
4. Another demonstrator calling a gay Member of the House of Representatives by a derogatory term descriptive of his sexual orientation (another freedom some would like to remove from our society);
5. And Tea Party demonstrators in Columbus, Ohio, hurling insults and money on a disabled man as a form for mockery of government provided health care for such individuals in need, this one who also happened to be a Veteran of the Armed Forces.

Yes, this is a period rich with extraordinary opportunities to ask students to join you in reflection on the meaning of respect and its role in the educational process. There are so many examples of disrespectful behavior that we have a veritable feast of teachable moments. Some questions for thought and discussion perhaps:

1. What does respect mean to you?
2. How do you convey that towards others?
3. Whom do you respect, and why?
4. How have being in environments either characterized by a culture of respect, or the opposite, affected your ability to learn in such environments?

These questions recall for me one such teachable moment I had when teaching University 101 at the University of South Carolina.

One class day, I took my students to the student union building to attend a staple of the American college scene, the annual “student activities fair” at which licensed student organizations set up booths to hawk their invitational wares. I asked my students to spend 45 minutes or so, walk around, observe the many opportunities for co-curricular joining. They were told by me to be prepared when they returned to class to share something they had learned.

Does the sophomore year matter?

3-31-10

Well, of course it does! Every period during the college experience matters, at least to some degree (pun intended). And how much time we have spent trying to develop some periods as being more meaningful, influential, formative, important than others.

I am an educator who has based a disproportionate share of his career trying to call more attention to the importance of the beginning college experience. For much of my career that "beginning" was defined as a "beginning" literally as in students starting college for the first time, most commonly right after high school.

But more recently, my work has broadened to focus on another kind of "new" student, the transfer student (the subject of another blog, or more, surely). And my work has also focused on senior students, as in graduating students; and on other students that I coined a phrase for as "students in transition" (introduced into the higher ed lexicon in 1995 when my colleagues and I at the University of South Carolina organized our first so-called "Students In Transition" national conference (which we continue to this day).

And now I find myself playing a small role in my university's latest national effort to call attention to still another transition point: the sophomore year.

The USC National Resource Center had been including the sophomore year as a theme of focus in its annual Students in Transition conferences since 1995. Then in 2000 we published our first monograph on the topic of second year students [Visible Solutions for Invisible Students](#). And in October 2009 Jossey-Bass published the first full length book treatment of the importance of the sophomore year, entitled [Helping Sophomores Succeed](#) with a team of lead editors from USC including myself and especially my colleagues Stuart Hunter and Barbara Tobolowsky.

And this week and next I am getting my head in gear to join several hundred higher educators for our first ever conference focused exclusively on this population, the Institute for Sophomore Student Success, April 11-13 (www.sc.edu/fye).

So, is this a transition you should be following? What do you know about the experience of second year students at your institution? Is this a distinct period of student transition, growth, differentiation? Are there problems that are especially acute during this period? What does being a sophomore mean now that most students don't enter as a coherent class with many characteristics in common?

If You Could Give Your Students One Book

4-2-10

If you could give your students just one book to read, that you thought, hoped, might really affect them, reveal something to them, move them, perhaps provide even an epiphany, what would you ask them to read?

This is not just idle speculation. I recommend this as an exercise for faculty development workshops, especially those preparing higher educators to teach first-year seminar courses. I am a co-author of three different texts for that genre and I have no illusion that my books would meet the test I have just suggested!

I come to ask this non hypothetical question because I had a wonderful, transformative, empowering epiphany from a professor who asked and answering that very question.

It was the fall of 1961, and I was a poorly performing freshman at Marietta College. I was lonely and homesick, and especially missed a young woman 600 miles away "back home". I was seventeen years old and to say that I was "undecided" did not do me justice. I had only one required course for the BA at Marietta and that was Speech 101. And I was failing that course. And that was because I had overcut the class to take several long weekends to go back home and see that special young woman. She didn't make me do it. I made myself do it.

The professor called me in near the end of the term and offered me a deal and thereby introduced me to one of the oldest pedagogies known to professors: reading as punishment.

He gave me this choice: read these two books and stand an oral examination on your learning and receive at the most, a D for the course; or reject the deal and get an F. I choose to read the two books.

What were they?

1. [Escape from Freedom](#) by Erich Fromm.
2. [The Lonely Crowd](#) by David Riesman.

I had no idea how much smarter this prof was than I was! Fromm's book was and is an analysis of why the most liberal democracy in Western Europe voluntarily ended democracy and elected a dictator, Adolph Hitler in 1933. The author's argument: freedom is a burden that cannot be handled well by some people. And my professor knew I was not handling my college freedom (to attend or not attend my classes) well at all. This book really forced me to examine my behavioral choices, my uses of freedom.

The other work, *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman's masterpiece that catapulted him to prominence in the lay press, was an insightful argument about how American society produces two types of people: 1. The "inner directed man"; and 2. The "outer directed man". Reading this I knew that I had to choose to become an "inner directed man" who marched to the beat of his own drummer, his own inner values. And the work helped me understand many of the values that I had required from my childhood exposure to children's literature in our society.

Years later, in 1980, I received an unsolicited letter from David Riesman. He was writing to ask me some questions in response to a book review I had had published in the *Journal of Higher Education*. It was truly a thrill to hear from this eminent scholar who had had such an influence on me as a very youthful college student just beginning his own journey of intellectual self discovery through higher education. Professor Riesman and I developed a correspondence that went on for over a decade. And it was the old fashion kind: letters. In 1990, my now wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, and I went up to Harvard to interview him; spent three hours with him; taped our conversation and then Betsy edited and had printed our interview in [The Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition](#).

Why all this interest in Professor Riesman? Because as one of the world's most distinguished sociologists of the twentieth century, he had also chaired the faculty committee which had created Harvard's freshman seminar in

1959. We wanted to know what led him to do that? And how was his seminar similar or different in its objectives than our seminar, University 101, at the University of South Carolina. Better leave that to a future blog. If you want a copy of the interview, write the Journal Editor at the USC National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

If my comments about Fromm have interested you, you should know that his best seller was a little book which sold in the multi, multi million copies: [The Art of Loving](#). This is a must gift for someone you love.

So back to my original question: if you could give your students one book (and, of course, you can) that could really influence them, what would it be? And when you have answered that question, I hope you will take the next step and do it.

Beyond Passover and Easter: It Can't Be Long Now

4-5-10

Ok, spring is officially here. Now Easter, Passover, and probably spring break are past us. And this means that our students' thoughts are turning to the end of the school year and summer. This is really an anachronistic way of thinking.

The notion of "the end of the year" is really a relic of the by gone influence of the agricultural cycle on the school calendar. Students were needed to work the fields in the summer and so couldn't go to school. And along with that developed the idea that if we had to have "summer school" it was only for dummies. Nothing could be further from the truth now.

The reality is that "summer school" is for the fast burners. And more importantly, thanks to research analysis performed by Clifford Adelman and reported in his noteworthy "Tool Box Revisited", we know that any participation in summer school, actually predicts for higher graduation rates, especially in minority students.

In work I have been spending recently in thinking about sophomore student success institute, in which I am going to participate next week, organized by USC, I recall that one of the challenges of our second year students is simply getting them back started in the routine of college again after their first summer "off". After all, they really hadn't been in college very long and were just beginning to get acclimated and then we excuse them for four months or so. This provides more than ample opportunity for our students to—as the southern Baptists used to say "backslide".

So, in the next 4-6 weeks ago, in your concluding conversations with students for the term, I hope you are getting them to consider going to summer school, or to at least some way stay connected to your college experience. What are some other ways to do this:

1. Take a summer course at another institution
2. Engage in "pre-reading" for courses for which they are pre-registered for next fall
3. Stay in touch with new friends, including faculty and staff they met this year
4. Find summer employment in some context that might be related in some way to their academic field of interest
5. Related thereto, try to find an internship, practicum before the term ends
6. Consider registering for an independent study which they could do over the summer
7. Seek employment on your campus and don't go home at all!

The above list is by no means exhaustive. Bottom-line theme: stay connected. It will increase their probability for success next year and ultimate graduation. The sooner they learn that "school is never really over" the better.

What Would You Like Me to Blog About?

4-7-10

Several decades ago when I was working with my colleague, Jerry Jewler, to administer the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina, Jerry shared with me one of the many great creative ideas he gifted to me: freewriting. Actually, it wasn't Jerry's original idea, but it struck me as original and it was original in our context. The source of the inspiration was the writing pedagogy guru, Peter Elbow, to whom Jerry introduced me. And what we were trying to do was to teach University 101 instructors who didn't teach writing, to teach writing to first-year students in the first-year seminar, to reinforce the writing instruction they were receiving in the first-year English course sequence. The moral of our story was we were trying to convey to students that writing was for life, not just English 101.

The freewriting technique at its most elementary level is a process for discovering ideas. And you simply ask students to start writing any ideas that pop into their heads, not be shared or submitted to anyone, especially their professor. And then as the ideas begin to flow, you gradually "focus" the freewriting process by providing "triggers" for the students to narrow the range of their free thinking and freewriting.

Bottomline: it was a very effective pedagogical process to use in first-year seminar instructor training workshops, and then with our students. I recalled this process as I started to write this blog post. I was trying to discover my blog idea of choice—I really do have so many, so I don't literally have to engage in freewriting. But my starting to write a blog, and freewriting have in common that they are both processes of idea discovery and ultimate communication.

As I was thinking about what to write about, I had a novel thought, one that we used to practice in University 101 too. Jerry and I would urge our instructors not to fill every class date on the syllabus in advance. Instead, we would urge them to find out from the students what they wanted to learn about and to use some of those open dates to respond to learner needs. Wow. What a novel idea: try to teach people what they want to learn.

And so, finally, to the point of this blog posting: I thought I would ask you, my reader(s): is there anything you would like me to write about? Eureka! Let's ask the customer. This doesn't obligate me to satisfy the request but I am certainly not asking the question just to know what my readers are interested in. I plan to do something with this! Thank you very much.

And now that I think about it, that University 101 course was not just a course for my first-year students. It was a course designed to make me a more effective professor. And it did just that.

Do You Know How Lucky You Are?

4-9-10

Well, of course you do. But maybe there are some facets of your life that you naturally take for granted, in the case I have in mind, like being around college students on a regular basis.

I am thinking of this because I was “around college students” every day of my professional life for 32.5 years. And then I took “early retirement” and have been working in a national higher education non-profit organization since then, and now all my “students” are adult higher educators like myself. So I am not teaching undergraduates on a regular basis and while I love my current life, I do miss those students.

However, when I visit campuses I always ask to meet with students. Yesterday I had the opportunity to spend about 75 minutes with a group of 60 graduating high school seniors in the little town where I have the good fortune to live, Brevard, North Carolina. I was speaking to them about the theme of making a successful transition to college.

And they reminded me, quite movingly, of my own former students. How could I have forgotten the sheer energy, pulsating, driving, pushing, mental, physical, hormonal energy? How easy they are to move to reaction, engage in responsive dialogue in class, move to insight and appreciation. What a pleasure and privilege to work with such wonderful developing people. We should never take this for granted.

And I couldn't help but being reminded of the new HBO series I have been watching, Pacific, about the US Marines struggles conquering the Japanese held Pacific islands in World War II. Unlike to standard Hollywood war movie with middle aged heroes like John Wayne, or even still relatively young actors in their 30's, my students yesterday at age 17 and 18, reminded me of why old men like me have been sending young men, and now women, like these to die, for centuries.

So what are all the constructive uses we could be making of all this energy, enthusiasm, willingness to be opened up and challenged? What an opportunity we have ever day to make a difference. Oh how I miss this. How lucky you are if you can have this every day. Above all, don't take this for granted. And your students won't take you for granted.

A Winning Combination

4-15-10

My lifetime professional objective has been to increase the perceived importance that campuses assign to beginning college students and their success. In the past decade, the regional accreditors have handed me a gift from the gods to push this aspiration to the next level of attainment.

This blog is occasioned by the fact that I spent the past weekend in Chicago for the 5th year in a row for the annual meeting of the Higher Learning Commission. In spite of the Great Recession, about 3500 higher educators convened for sessions, interaction, sharing of intelligence, and, believe it or not, help from their regional accreditor.

When I was a younger faculty member and in my formative years, my impressions of regional accreditors were shaped entirely by the one that accredited colleges and universities in my own region: SACS, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. The mere mention of the acronym was enough to cause a multitude of potential reactions: increased heart rates, panic, aversion, boredom, you name it. While we may have held many different views, one thing that all educators agreed on was that the reaccreditation process had everything to do with compliance, bean counting, and a monumental in generating reams of paper, literally, that would eventually end up on the metaphorical shelf and lead to absolutely nothing. Those days are gone.

Fast forward to the present, and the accreditors are the biggest force for change in the academy. They are no longer about bean counting, but about a new kind of accountability: for student learning. And you can't achieve that if you don't engage in "assessment". And it isn't enough just to be doing assessment; you have to be using the results of assessment to bring about educational change.

To encourage campuses to take this seriously and to reward them for their efforts, at least three of the regionals have adopted procedures for reaffirmation of accreditation that allow a campus to pick a "special emphasis", study it, come up with an action plan to improve it, and then implement the plan, before the visiting team comes to review. These three are the Higher Learning Commission, the Middle States Association, and the Southern Association. Hurray for them.

And this is the "winning combination" that I referred to in the title of this blog. Now we have the chance to get rewarded for something we don't have to do by doing something we have to do, i.e. the latter being getting our accreditation reaffirmed and the former being a special improvement focus on the beginning college experience.

Because there is no higher priority for any campus than reaffirming its accreditation, by definition then, any focused improvement effort that is linked to reaccreditation is also going to be very high priority and will have to be resourced in order to demonstrate institutional commitment. What a wonderful opportunity then for advocates like me of improving the beginning college experience. Finally, we have a powerful new lever for change, investment and imprimatur.

Moral of the story: engage with senior colleagues on your campus who will be involved in discussing a focus for your institution's next reaffirmation of accreditation. See if you can't link that in some way to the first-year improvement efforts on your campus. This is not rocket science at all. All you have to do is push the idea forward.

Since 2005, I have had the privilege to work with eight different institutions in the Higher Learning Commission region, all of whom used my non-profit organization's Foundations of Excellence process as a "special emphasis" self study for HLC. This has been a very exciting process to observe and support, and I commend it to my readers as a powerful new way to drive change towards a more influential first year on your campus.

Oh No, “The Sophomore Year Experience”

4-20-10

I can just hear it now: Some detractors of higher education efforts to provide more support for students will be saying: “Give me a break, they are doing it again, more “hand holding” for still another cohort.”

The “they” refers to the University of South Carolina and its National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. As many of my readers will know, this is an internationally prominent higher education center which provides professional development support and a literature base to help post secondary institutions be more successful with “students in transition.” Founded in 1986 by this blogger, the Center has been highly successful in getting the academy to pay more attention to the importance of different student “transitions” during the undergraduate period and then to enable institutions to provide more appropriate support to help students move successfully through these transitions.

Until recently the transitions that we paid the most attention to where the one entering college, and the one leaving college, respectively known as “the first-year experience” and “the senior year experience.” The Center’s latest push is to call attention to the needs of second year students. Previously, the Center had published a monograph on this topic, done some surveying of second year educational practices, and taken the lead under the Center’s Executive Director, Stuart Hunter, to produce a book with Jossey- Bass Publishing, “Helping Sophomores Achieve”, October 2009.

The latest flag run up the pole was a specific professional development activity hosted by the Center in Savannah, April 11-13, an inaugural “Sophomore Success Institute” attended by approximately 120 higher educators from the US, Canada, and the Republic of Ireland.

I am going into some detail here to point all this out to simply call your attention to this new area of focus. I is reasonable to assume there will be future “institutes” on this topic, more research and then publishing, and especially more attention on campuses. If you would like to converse electronically about this and join a national network of interested parties, USC maintains a sophomore year experience listserv (subscribe at www.sc.edu/fye)

Back to the hypothetical detractor’s comment: yes, they are at it again—as I have illustrated with the USC sponsored activities above.

And, yes, this is another example of “hand holding” if by that you will accept my operational definition of that as some kind of intentional, educationally purposeful intervention designed to target a cohort of similar students and to increase their probability of success.

In spite of the recession, and the deficit, we are now, thank goodness, in a national leadership era when the current Presidential administration is challenging us as a country to regain our world leadership position in both access and student success. We can’t achieve this without directing increased attention to various cohorts and specific bottlenecks, barriers, in the educational pipeline. While it may have been assumed that once we get students past the first year, they are “over the hump” there is enormous evidence to the contrary. And so this focus on the second year is about taking additional efforts to get students “over the hump”.

What Will Our Students Remember?

4-26-10

This weekend there was a thrilling, memorable, event going on in the city near where I live, Asheville, N.C.: our President, and First Lady Michelle, were in town for a vacation. No matter what your political persuasion, most Americans get a real kick out of getting even near a sitting President. And this evokes for me my memory of the first Presidential candidate I saw, when I was a senior in college.

And this makes me think about the larger subject of just what does stick with our students? What are they likely to remember, in this case referenced above, 46 years later? And is what they remember connected to anything we did intentionally for our students in either the curriculum or co-curriculum?

It was early fall, 1964 and US Senator Barry Goldwater was running against sitting President Lyndon Johnson. Goldwater was making a mid western “whistle stop” campaign tour which in itself was sufficient to invoke all kinds of nostalgia. And he made a stop in Marietta, Ohio, a rural community in Appalachia. It was a thrill.

He stood on the back of the very last car of the train, surrounded in tri-color patriotic bunting. And there in the heart of Appalachian coal country, he railed against Social Security—mind you some 31 years after that legislation had been enacted (with plenty of Social Security recipients in his audience). And he quoted his running mate, a retired Air Force general, Curtis LeMay, who threatened to “bomb the North Vietnamese back into the stone age!” In light of all that happened over the decade, and upon my reflection on those events, this was really an incredible appearance. He spoke, quite appropriately, beside an old, run down flop house hotel, which proudly proclaimed that it offered “since 1897-- the best hospitality in Marietta.”

This sets me to wondering if it would be a worthwhile exercise to ask your students, perhaps in first-year seminar, what have they experienced as a focused event in time, during college so far, that they think they will remember one, two, three decades out or further. Was this something that happened “in class” or out of class? Was it something that a faculty member or professional staff member planned specifically and hence was under institutional direction? Or were the majority of these experiences unplanned, serendipitous, beyond the control of the institution.

Perhaps if we/you thought about what the students tell us stays with them, we might be able to more intentionally plan some of these events in advance, and hence become true “facilitators” of student learning. Let me know if you try something like this.

What Are You Learning? How Are You Reacting to It? And What Are You Going to Do with It? Teaching for Reflection

4-29-10

These are three of the most important questions I learned early in my professorial career that I should be asking my students in every single class period. I didn't originally ask these questions when I started teaching. In fact, I had been teaching at the college level for six years before I was a participant in the University of South Carolina's first "faculty training" or the University 101 first-year seminar. And that "training" was transformative for me as a young professor. And that "transformation" is precisely why so many colleges and universities have been offering such "training" since ours began in 1972.

It would be a subject for multiple blogs for me to recite all I learned in that training. But two basic ideas were to focus on what students were learning—or what you wanted to teach them—on both the cognitive level (i.e. what did you learn?) and on the affective level (i.e. how are you reacting to it?). I had never considered before how I learned, our students learn, at both levels and how the two interact and influence each other.

I had also not thought about taking those questions to the next level. Why of course after asking students to think and draw some conclusions about what they are learning and their reactions thereto, it was now important to ask them: and what are you going to do with what you learned? I realize this suggests a utilitarian, potentially practical view of learning. But I don't mean to overemphasize that view. It could certainly be just a matter of a student deciding that something he/she learned was intellectually curious and should be filed away and remembered as such.

It was about 20 years later that I was serving on the board of directors for AAHE, the former American Association for Higher Education. And in that important service I met the father of the service learning movement, Professor Edward Zlotkowski, a Professor of English at Bentley College in Waltham, MA, and the editor of AAHE's series of 25 volumes on "Service Learning in the Disciplines." And it was Edward who gave me new language for this process of what we had been asking students to do in the first-year seminar: "reflection." Edward argued, persuasively, that some of the most powerful learning that takes place is when we ask our students to "reflect" on what they are learning, its meaning to them, and what they are going to do with it.

I have maintained every since that we should, most importantly then, be teaching for reflection. Once I started practicing this pedagogy, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Forget the Official Commencement: Your “Farewell Address” Is the One That Will Matter

5-3-10

I love commencement season. For 13 years I had a job as Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for the University of South Carolina’s five “Regional Campuses” that required my presence at five different graduation ceremonies. I became a connoisseur of the genre. Seriously, I came to look forward to those commencement addresses and I heard some doozies, truly memorable.

I have also given a number of them myself. And I am convinced this is an exercise wasted on the young, but not the parents. In one speech I gave, about 15 years ago I threw out the challenge that if anyone in the audience could remember my name after more than 10 years and contact me, I would give them a substantial amount of money. I haven’t heard from a soul. And I crafted some pretty good speeches if I don’t say so myself.

What set me to thinking about this was that I, like most Americans, follow the schedule of our President, no matter whom or where he is, with considerable influence. Last weekend, for example, he was in Asheville, North Carolina, about 35 miles from where I live in Brevard. My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I flew into the Asheville airport last Saturday evening and there right by our gate on the tarmac was Air Force One “The United States of America.” What a thrill. And this weekend, President Obama went to the University of Michigan to deliver the commencement address (and then on to the annual Washington correspondents’ dinner and then to Louisiana to observe the oil spill disaster. But it is his trip to Ann Arbor that has set me off on this tear about commencements.

Each commencement season I am so thankful to [The New York Times](#) for printing the texts or at least excerpts from so many commencement addresses. I urge my readers to be on the alert for these.

OK, finally, to my point: I urge you to give the real commencement speech that matters to your students. They are going to forget the real one, if they even go. Participation in such ceremonies is going to the way of so many other traditions, south. Besides, the students won’t know the speaker anyway. But they do know you. And they care what you think. And they have come to trust you. You are the one with real influence. I urge you to convert your last class from a final exam (do that some other time—it is important too, of course), but, instead, YOU be the real commencement speaker. You will never have another chance with these particular students and neither will they.

Last Chance: Urge your Students to Stay Connected this Summer

5-5-10

The Baptists got it right on one thing: summer is the time for “backsliding.” It has been explained to me that the origin of the ubiquitous southern Protestant phenomena of “Vacation Bible School” was the recognition that in summer, young people had more free time, and thus more time to be the handmaidens of the devil. The regular school structure was absent and “Vacation Bible School” was an effort to fill that void and keep kids on the straight and narrow.

A few years ago the most distinguished educational researcher in the employ of the US Department of Education, Clifford Adelman, published in his volume “Toolbox Revisited” some compelling data about the impact of having participated in any summer school whereby credits were accumulated, and probability of degree completion. What he found was that any participation in summer school enhanced the probability of degree completion, especially for minority students.

This all points to the value of staying connected. There is no doubt that for many students, summer is a disruption of “satisfactory academic progress”. They “go back home” in their heads, if not literally. And they fall back into pre college habits of mind and practice. And then it takes a lot of catch up time in the fall to get back in the groove.

So as you are winding down the year, I urge you to invite your students to rethink their stereotypes about summer school. It is not for dummies as they may have learned in high school. It is for the fast burners. Urge their consideration for summer school to “maintain the momentum”, get an especially hard course out of the way, experiment with something new, etc.

In addition to enrolling in credit courses, there are other ways to “stay connected” during the summer:
Many colleges hire students for summer employment-not glamorous work, but often comes with room and board and maybe time to do a summer school course too, and earn some extra money.
Internships, coop, practica, all connected to the major
Study abroad
Volunteer experience connected to the major
ROTC summer camp

And this is not a complete list by any means. This is to urge you then in one of your final classes to invite students to stay connected during the summer. It may eliminate one more opportunity for us to lose them, and them to lose us. The latter is the more serious of the two.

Some Good News on the Retention Front

5-17-10

I didn't set out to do this, but I accidentally became one of the apostles of the retention movement. The year was 1975 and a dear colleague at the University of South Carolina, Paul P. Fidler, had been tasked by an interim President of the University of South Carolina to see if a controversial new course, University 101, was meeting its objectives. And I had a personal stake in this as I was its brand new, and first, faculty director, untenured too. While the course was not started to have any intentional impact on retention, this was an unexpected discovery of this administratively directed assessment process. In the mid 70's, we had far more students coming to us or wanting to come to us than we could accommodate. We had started the course for other purposes, especially to prevent student riots by teaching new students to love the place. But there it was, a significantly higher retention rate for students who took this elective, three credit course, even though as a cohort they had lower predicted grade point averages than the non- participants, and hence we would have expected a lower retention rate. Well, this extraordinary finding, repeated year after year until we no longer had a group of non-participants large enough to measure the effect, was the impetus for the retention interest in first-year seminars. Thus, the finding was transformative, and was the engine behind a vast race to replicate this course throughout American higher education. I have just had a déjà vu experience.

Sincere, 2003, I have been leading a project called Foundations of Excellence (FoE), through the non-profit organization which is immodestly named for me. This is a voluntary, comprehensive, assessment and action planning process to improve student learning, success and retention. It purports to do this by producing a very simple, but very rare idea for institutions: an actual plan to move them to excellence in the first year.

Since 2003 we have engaged 167 colleges and universities, two and four-year, in this voluntary process. We have known of many, many outcomes from the process, and they have been described on our website at www.fyfoundations.org. But only last week did we receive a report from an independent researcher/evaluator, Dr. Brent Drake, of Purdue University, that reported to us on what was the correlation between campuses that had participated in Foundations of Excellence and their longitudinal retention rates. We had to wait this long for this data due to two factors: 1) the lag time in institutional reporting of IPEDS data; and 2) allowing for multiple years after completion of the FoE planning process for campuses to actually implement their action plans.

So, what has been found? Well, even the perennial optimist that I am was amazed by the highly significant findings. Overall, institutions that have implemented their action plans to a self-reported "very high degree" have increased their retention rates an average of 5.6 points which is an 8.2% increase in retention.

If you would be interested in this report on what this evaluator found in more detail, feel free to write me for a copy (gardner@fyfoundations.org).

I rarely can say anything very succinctly, but this study confirms the following for me:

Most campuses do not have a comprehensive plan for the first year, let alone a vision to attain excellence in their beginnings

If a campus actually creates a plan and then actually implements that plan, it is highly probable that it will significantly increase its retention rate.

This is an example of intentionality!

Learn More about Improving the Transfer Experience for STEM Students

5-19-10

Several weeks ago President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama came to Asheville, N.C. for a three day weekend "vacation." This is of interest to me because my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I live about 35 miles outside of Asheville in a peaceful little mountain town, Brevard. By all the press accounts, the first couple really enjoyed Asheville. They visited a popular barbecue restaurant, "12 Bones," and the world-famous Biltmore House, played golf, and, unlike the Governor of South Carolina, actually hiked the Appalachian Trail.

Most notably though, they stayed at a historic resort hotel, [The Grove Park Inn](#), a century old world-class establishment. I tell you this because you too can come to Asheville in September and stay at the Grove Park Inn. But instead of being on vacation, you can spend two productive days learning and thinking about what you can do to improve the transfer student experience of a particular cohort of students this country needs more of: STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) Transfers. [Click here](#) to learn more. The University of North Texas's National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students (NISTS), led by two UNT education professors, Bonita Jacobs and Marc Cutright, will host this new conference scheduled for September 19-21, 2010.

Given the enormous need our country has for STEM graduates, and the fact that the transfer experience is now the normative one in US higher education, I wouldn't miss this upcoming conference where the Obama's like to go on vacation. I will hope to see you there and learn with you.

The “Correction”: What Could That Mean In Our Higher Education Context?

5-21-10

This week is one where we have finally had the long awaited “correction” in the financial markets, as defined by at least a 10% drop in the value of the market say as measured by the Dow Jones average, since the high for 2010. So this week while I worked away diligently at my messianic ambition to improve the first year in American higher education, I lost a great deal of my savings, without doing anything specific to wreak this misfortune on myself. Now, since the low of the market post the collapse in fall 2008, that low being around March of 2009, admittedly, there are many weeks I did absolutely nothing specific to increase my net wealth, but it increased anyway. I am certainly an investor who had been waiting for, expecting, the “correction” to arrive.

Also, during this week, we have watched as an unprecedented number of lobbyists swarm on Washington like the horde of locusts they are, killing the crops that the rest of us hoped to raise. Here some members of Congress had been hoping for a “correction,” i.e. to reverse the trends of the past several decades and to impose on the financial markets and financial services industries some long overdue “corrections.” We are witnessing, no surprise, the spectacular clout of these lobbyists and the gradual evisceration of the bill designed to “protect” us by means of “correction.”

This has all got me thinking about what does the concept of “correction” mean in the higher ed context? We have certainly, most of us anyway, seen more than a 10% decline in our net fortunes. Has that triggered a “correction.” If we were to name a litany of abuses, profligate use of resources, priorities out of balance, can we say there has been a “correction” driven by the Great Recession. Just what would that mean?

I am not sure. But I know I have not seen it. Has publish or perish been modified? Have faculty workloads, a huge factor in the “cost” of higher education, been significantly increased? Has the faculty rewards system been significantly modified to reward faculty for greater measures of “productivity?” Have there been consolidations, shake outs? Have we decided to shift resources significantly to the most productive sectors of the academy (e.g. community colleges)?

Recognizing that most of our students do not live on trust funds, have we become more “vocational” in our orientation as to the purposes of higher education? I could go on.

But no, I am not seeing a correction. I am seeing the status quo largely being maintained, but with severe cutbacks for the least powerful in the academy. I don’t think this qualifies as a correction. Outside of higher education so many societal elements mirror what has been going on in the business sector in terms of prioritizing, right sizing, down sizing, outsourcing, etc. But not higher education. What will it take? Truly the capacity of our culture to resist change is truly phenomenal.

And this has implications, profound implications, for the focus of my work in trying to get colleges and universities to make significant changes in the ways they organize and execute the beginning college experience. We just aren’t hurting enough yet for a correction. And I am not betting we are going to have one, on the macro level. So I am going to push on as I have been for the last 35 years pushing for “corrections” at the micro level, i.e. the institutional level, and especially in terms of what we do with, for and to our new and transfer students.

An Outcome of College: What We Do on Vacation

6-1-10

One of the nine so-called “[Foundational Dimensions of Excellence](#)” © developed by the non-profit organization which I lead, is named the “roles and purposes” Dimension. Very briefly, this has to do with how colleges and universities communicate to new students what are the “roles and purposes” of higher education in particular, and this institution in particular. It is our belief that if we could get students to better understand and respect these “roles and purposes” that we could enhance their motivation, and from that everything else that we aspire to for students would follow: growth, change, learning, retention, graduation, etc.

This is a challenging concept to get across to students, i.e. what are the purposes of college. I attack this in my work with students by talking about what we know are the outcomes of college—and we know a great deal about this. Specifically, we know there are all sorts of differences in college educated vs. non- college educated citizens. One of those differences is how much leisure time and we have (we have more of it) and how we spend it. This leads me to the subject of this post: how I am spending a vacation this week and the fact that I do this because I am a college graduate.

I am taking an annual vacation this week with my wife, fellow student transition scholar, Betsy Barefoot, by staying in “the Holy City” of South Carolina, Charleston, S.C. for the annual Spoleto Festival of the Arts. This seventeen day event has been hosted in Charleston for more than 30 years now and is undoubtedly one of South Carolina’s most important contributions to contemporary society. Every year thousands of visitors flock to this tourist mecca, not for beach and sun this period, but for inspiration, enrichment, and entertainment from the arts. The Festival includes theater (fringe and more mainstream); music of many genres: opera, classical, choral, chamber, jazz; lectures; art exhibitions; dance; and more; all set in one of the most beautifully and carefully historically preserved cities in North America. Betsy and I are like truckers on speed: constantly moving from event to event—3-4-5 a day, interspersed with the gastronomical delights for which the city is also famous.

I am sure that I would never choose to spend a vacation this way had I not had a college education and also chosen to live with another college educated person, who also happened to have been a music major in college. It was college that transformed me to become a live longer seeker of intellectual, mental, stimulation, searching for ideas and inspiration, the kind that are so stimulated by the arts. Knowing this as I do, one of the things I insisted when I ran the first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina, University 101, was that we use that course, in part, to introduce our new students to the arts to see how they might find their own lives influenced by this “dimension” of human creativity.

If this blog makes you think of nothing else: check out the [Spoleto Arts Festival](#). It could be a unique vacation for you to, and one more way to use your own college education.

What Has Been the Impact of the Great Recession on the First-Year Improvement Initiative?

6-7-10

I wish I knew. Or maybe I don't. I have been accumulating all sorts of horror story anecdotes. But I don't have any hard data. Even raising this question for the purposes of posting this blog has served a useful purpose for me: I shall resolve to try to offer a better answer by having us collect some empirical data on this.

This spring, the non-profit organization which I lead, conducted an [internal study](#) of what had been the results of a process we have now offered to 167 colleges and universities: a planning self-study assessment process known as Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year. What we particularly wanted to know was what has resulted from the "action plan" that we have helped each of these campuses develop to improve their students' beginning college experience. And we found for those campuses that *did not experience a high level of success* in implementation, two major contributing variables: 1) change in senior leadership; and 2) financial problems.

Well, change in senior leadership cannot be attributed primarily to the Great Recession although all the stress from this economic catastrophe may have been the last straw leading some senior leaders to give up administration, return to teaching, and their families, and/or retire. But the other factor, financial problems, certainly can be attributed to the recession.

To be more balanced though, I have an equal or greater number of anecdotes that this year many campuses have further strengthened their efforts to support new students, in part, because of the recession. The students need more help than ever and so do the institutions to maintain their enrollment. So, my jury, the jury, is out.

I write these reflections as I fly across the Pacific to the annual [International Conference on The First-Year Experience](#), an event I first organized in 1984. I plan to check out there what has been the impact of the world-wide recession on first-year improvement efforts. One immediate impact: this conference has only one third the number of participants it enjoyed three years ago when last this meeting was held in Hawaii.

An Annual Glimpse Beyond My Cultural Blinders

6-9-10

This blog finds me attending the annual [International Conference on The First-Year Experience](#). This is part of a meeting series begun by me in 1986 with prior venues in the US including Hawaii, the UK—both England and Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, and Canada. As you might suspect, this series is an outgrowth of the more US focused series of conferences on The First-Year Experience which I began in 1982. This year's meeting is on the island of Maui.

No doubt about it, Hawaii is one of those places that lives up to its billing. And, while this may be straining the limits of gullibility of some of my readers, this really is an ideal location for an academic meeting. If you can't relax here, and set aside the stresses and distractions of your current real world somewhere else, you can't do it anywhere. I am amazed that even in this beautiful setting, the delegates are truly in session all day long.

This year was a smaller meeting, at least by the standards of prior Hawaiian conferences in this series, some 345 attendees, down from about 650 three years ago. I am sure that the economy is the only explanation.

What used to be solely an American preoccupation has truly become an international higher education focus. As many societies have expanded access and broadened participation, their challenge has been to maintain graduation rates without lowering standards while simultaneously expanding access. The language of "retention" has become universal, much as I have argued against the use of this business metric for maintaining "customers" as an educational rationale. Back in the Cold War political scientists wrote about the so called "convergence factor" to describe the gradual diminution of previously great differences between the former Soviet Union and its arch enemy, the United States. Over time, they became more like us, and we more like them. I see exactly the same thing in this international FYE movement.

Well, if you weren't here this year, it is, obviously too late. But put next year's meeting on your calendar: [June 20-23, 2011 in Manchester, England](#). This meeting will be piggybacked on a preceding [meeting of European nations](#) who have been gathering for five years or so to discuss their versions of "the first-year experience." What a great opportunity for cross cultural stimulation this will be. Of all the FYE conferences I have attended, this international gathering is clearly my favorite. There is no convening that gets me to see more clearly the cultural components of the US first-year experience—and that is because seeing the first year components of other cultures pushes and expands my understanding of what others and we are trying to do. There is just nothing like this. I hope you will join me next year. And for any readers who

have been to any of our UK conferences in the past, for the first time this meeting will not be using UK standard university residence halls. Instead, we will succumb to the use of a commercial hotel, the Renaissance, in Manchester. When we used to go to Britain, we attempted to adopt the indigenous culture for academic meetings. Now we ask the indigenous people to adapt the US way of convening fellow educators: in hotels, not on campuses. This is a benign example of the corporatization of our meeting culture. But there are far worse fates and I am just thrilled that this all is still thriving in spite of the Great Recession—and perhaps in part because of it!

An Obvious Opportunity and Suggestion

6-14-10

The purpose of this blog is to make a suggestion about a very obvious opportunity: the need to integrate what we do in first-year seminars this fall with something about the ecological, economic, human, and political disaster unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico.

While there is much that is unclear, one thing is certain: this matter will NOT be behind us by the opening of the school year and we are faced with unprecedented opportunities for teachable moments this coming fall. If ever there was an external, overbearing topic that every entering college student should be considering and trying to develop some new ways of understanding, studying, researching-- this is it.

This also gives us the opportunity, recognizing that there are many different types of first-year seminars, to make one bold fell swoop of a move to finally make every such course have compelling academic content.

Be thinking in advance not only what you can have students read and discuss, but who are the members of your faculty whose disciplinary expertise would lend themselves to be called upon as guest commentators, discussants.

We are faced here with a real game changer, and as Rahm Emanuel has so famously reminded us: "a crisis is a terrible opportunity to waste."

Reminding Myself About the Importance of Having a Personal Philosophy of Education

6-17-10

Recently I co-facilitated a workshop with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, at the annual International Conference on The First-Year Experience. I received some feedback during that event that reminded me of an important prior learning.

We have about 30 participants in this event so it was of a size that was ideal for interaction. And because it was an international meeting, we had educators from a number of countries, all of whom had in common their interest in improving first year tertiary education student success. Two of the participants were from South Africa and one of them sent me a message.

As part of the workshop, Betsy and I gave each participant a notebook of print materials. And we tend to over prepare and so sometimes, particularly I, do not always get to “cover” all the material I inserted as companion documents. And in this event I neglected to make any specific comments about/reference to a document I included entitled “My Philosophy of Education.” Well, this South African higher educator came up to me at a break and pointed out to me that I had “skipped” that handout, asked me why, and strongly but politely asked me if I would revisit it. She told me that she thought it was extremely important for me to make explicit to the other participants not only that I actually had a philosophy of education but what it was very specifically. And so, later in the day, I did exactly as she had asked. After the workshop she told me that was the most meaningful and “powerful” part of the day for her.

So what was going on here? Well, as a public intellectual and leader of this so-called “first-year movement” I realize that people do want to know what I think and why. More broadly though, I think many educators want to know that their educational leaders have a clearly defined, well thought out philosophy and rationale and that such is the basis for their work with students, in the research, and in other areas of responsibility. I have also learned that many educators so rarely hear a leader articulate a consistent, concrete philosophy that it is rather striking when they do hear one! What a sad commentary.

Betsy Barefoot and I taught a course at the University of South Carolina for a number of years, a graduate seminar for masters and doctoral students in the Higher Education program(s) offered by the College of Education. This was a “special topics” seminar on the literature base of the “first-year experience” educational reform movement. Betsy and I would tell our students the very first day of class that they would be required to submit at the end of the course an explicit statement of their philosophy of education. When we presented this requirement we initially drew blank stares and requests for explanation of just exactly what were we asking the students to do? Why no one had ever asked them before to even think about having a philosophy of education, let alone to write and submit one for critique. At the end of the course, we were told year after year that this was one of the truly most important things we asked the students to do. So I had a number of reminders previously that this kind of thinking, sharing, could be influential with aspiring and current educators. But I had really forgotten for a long time to be so explicit myself, that is, until this new colleague from South Africa requested me to elucidate in this fashion.

I really appreciate what she did. And I am going to do this more often, including tomorrow in a speech I am going to give. Moreover, I would invite any/all of my hardy band of readers to do the same—to share with their students, audiences, employees, mentees, etc, your philosophy of education. After all, your philosophy, your core values and beliefs are and should be at the root of everything you are trying to do for students and higher education. I believe you will really stand out if you do this and you will especially help your students to understand what you are really all about and just what it is that you are trying to do for them.

If you are interested in my statement of philosophy, drop me an e-mail and I will send it to you (gardner@fyfoundations.org). Better yet, write and share your own.

Never Enough Opportunities to Teach Leadership

6-21-10

Very early in my career, thanks to a visionary president at the University of South Carolina, I had the opportunity to help design a course, University 101, for which one of the goals was to teach students how to “survive” the University. And I realized in this design process that I had learned a tremendous amount from my US Air Force experience about how to teach someone to “survive” a stressful, important, new, challenging experience. Beyond that, I came to realize you could teach human beings how to do just about anything if you were intentional about it. But you had to believe that it could be taught, and that people would want to learn it and be able to do so. And so we found that we could teach students to not only “survive” but to flourish in this new, to them, university environment and that students truly wanted to learn this.

It was some years later that I realized that the most important purpose of America’s colleges and universities was to produce our country’s and communities’ leaders. And I discovered a field called “Leadership Studies” which is now a widely recognized academic discipline offering undergraduate cognates, minors, majors towards bachelors degrees and graduate degrees too. In fact, this is one discipline that my alma mater, Marietta College, in Marietta, Ohio truly excels in offering as one of its niche elements. And, just as I did early in my career, I have learned both that leadership can be taught, and that students want to learn to understand and to practice it. I was reminded of that this week.

Specifically, I was invited to provide two sessions for a local Rotary Club Leadership Camp held in Brevard, North Carolina this week. I had the privilege and fun of talking with about 60 campers who were rising eleventh and twelfth grade high school students drawn from the western North Carolina mountains region where I have the good fortune to live.

In these two sessions I was reminded that:

1. Female students will disproportionately volunteer for such educational experiences as opposed to male students.
2. Female students congregated near the “front” of the class, males disproportionately to the “rear”.
3. Female students engaged in a higher level of voluntary verbal participation.
4. The adult Rotarians present as “counselors”, local Rotary leaders, were disproportionately male. But that’s because they were all of an age and generation when men overpopulated US colleges and universities.
5. Today’s students really are interested in learning about leadership.
6. They want to become leaders and they “get it” that college is a major proving ground for leaders.
7. And at this point in their secondary school education they really don’t know much about what leadership is or how to intentionally learn how to practice it.

I was reminded that it would be a good thing if all of us higher educators spoke and directed ourselves more often to this overarching societal objective. This really is “relevant” and “relevance” enhances student engagement which leads to so many other positive student outcomes. Really our work does or should all come down to producing more leaders for our society. We all have a stake in this. We all have a contribution to make. I am really glad I spent about 2.5 hours with these campers. There has to be a Rotary Club near you doing something like this. Do check it out. We shouldn’t leave this entirely to the Rotarians, although I greatly admire their initiative.

I Am What I Studied

6-23-10

One of the decadal rituals of many colleges and universities is “general education reform”—“core curriculum revision”—“reinventing the core”, etc. Often these pronouncements are occasions for me for mild cynicism. I say to myself: “Yeah, sure, all they have done is to change the boxes for what students have to check off to satisfy the degree requirements.” Or, simply, this is simply a curricular affirmation of the power block at work in the Faculty Senate which has once again redivided the FTE pie.

This reflection is prompted by the fact that I visited a college recently that had just completed a massive curricular overhaul. It struck me as particularly courageous because they are a large urban community, multi-campus, college and they may be biting off more than they can chew. I admonished them with my usual mantra that it often matters more what colleges do to address HOW the curriculum is delivered than WHAT is delivered.

Yet in preparing for this campus visit, it was an occasion for me to once again reflect on the realization that I am what I studied. What students are asked to learn really does matter, that is if they can engage that curriculum using deep learning pedagogies and have it really influence their life values, insights, and choices. I urge my readers to ask themselves: are you what you studied?

To illustrate, I will share some of the ways I am what I studied:

1. I went to a small liberal arts college that was writing intensive. I had to write in every course I took. So I am a writing intensive person and citizen. For me, writing is a primary mode of thinking and communication.
2. I had to take a public speaking course in my first term of college. It was the only common required course in all majors and which no student could exempt. Much of what I do now to earn a living connects to public speaking. I can still quote explicitly the lessons I learned from that first and only required course I took in public speaking.
3. My college did NOT require me to choose a major. And so I didn't. Instead I received an “interdisciplinary” studies “concentration” bachelors degree. And I am a much less narrow (I think) person today because of this. I am thankful to dear alma mater for never forcing me to choose a major.
4. My college did NOT make me take any mathematics. That was a big mistake. I am still math challenged, essentially, mathematically illiterate. I would be a much better thinker today had I taken math -- for math is really about teaching thinking. Today, I need external assistance to explain to me various documents, reports, that come my way because I am not competent to address the mathematical and statistical presentations. That is a real weakness.
5. My college did not mandate any introductory coursework for me in the fine arts. Consequently, I developed no appreciation for the arts until mid life, in my middle forties, I met my current wife, Betsy Barefoot, who had a passion for the arts and gave that gift to me. How different my young adulthood would have been had I discovered dance, opera, classical music, live theater. But thank goodness I was opened up later rather than sooner.
6. My college courses constantly forced me to look at the big picture abstractions, derived from masses of more minute information. Now I do that all the time.
7. I am persuaded that my college education made me the big picture thinker I am today. It taught me many contextual ways to understand what I needed to understand to read the paper, listen intelligently to politicians, you name it.
8. My college gave me my first and most formative relatively risk free laboratory to put into practice applications of what I was learning in the curriculum, to what I now do for a living: facilitate organizational change. This happened by my involvement in student government, co-curricular

activities where I got to practice: speaking, writing, persuading, dreaming, organizing, facilitating, leading, pursuing a vision for a better community, and a quest for social justice.

I am what I studied. How about you? If you agree that you are too, how can/should you communicate this to your students to provide a catalyst for their own thinking about how they are becoming what they study? What students are asked to study really does matter.

The New American Comprehensive College

6-25-10

I got started in writing a blog because one of my younger colleagues in our Institute made me do it. She is much more “hip” than I am and I try to almost always take her advice about how I can more effectively communicate in the media of today.

At the same time as she presented her basic argument that I needed to do a blog, she tried her best to explain to me that blogs by their very nature, needed to be relatively short. I am afraid, I have not learned this lesson well enough.

So in this blog I am merely going to raise a topic and suggest that if you want a more complete rendering of my ideas on this, you should write me and I will send you a brief two page document that lays them out. This blog was inspired by fact that on June 17 I spent an entire day with a large urban community college district. And I told them, as I am telling every “community college” audience I get in front of these days-- that I have stopped referring to them as “community colleges.” You know, people get attached to their names. And it can be pretty threatening to tell people they ought to drop their name to which they have become so attached now since the end of World War II.

And what would I suggest we call “community colleges?” Quite simple: “The New American Comprehensive College”

And if you would like my brief exposition on this heresy, drop me a note at gardner@fyfoundations.org and I will send you my thoughts on this.

Very succinctly: Community colleges is what they were. New American comprehensive colleges is what they are, have become. There is no more comprehensive institutional type, now that approximately 100 US “community colleges” have been authorized to award four-year degrees.

What's going on:

1. A perfect storm has converged: the economy tanked and we elected an Ivy League President who is enamored with community colleges.
2. These colleges have become the first choice of millions.
3. The median age of their students is plummeting. This is forcing them to become more like other “colleges.”
4. The social safety net has been gutted over the past twenty years. These colleges now offer many social welfare functions: health care, childcare, adult literacy training, job retraining, adult counseling, and redemption from the failings of the US public school system.
5. The baccalaureate institutions cannot possibly meet the demand for all the public school teachers and nurses we need, and other occupational types too. And because four-year institutions haven't been able to get their costs under control, and/or don't really want to expand their business of offering majors for low paying graduates who don't give back big bucks, we have no choice but to expand the “two-year sector.”
6. We cannot possibly increase transfer rates as long as we require a change of institutional cultures for students to experience when they literally “move” from one institution to another. So we have to make it possible for them to “finish” without ever “leaving.”

And this is only a partial list of descriptors of what is going on. Many of these changes are very threatening to my colleagues in the baccalaureate sector but I am excited by them. And there is no putting this genie back in the

bottle. It's time we stopped calling these 1400+ colleges "community colleges." They are not fixed any longer just to local communities and they have truly become "comprehensive." It's all in a name. Names do matter.

Could We Develop a Curriculum to Teach This?

6-28-10

As I am sure all my readers do, I have a summer early morning ritual. It is to eat breakfast on the deck of my mountain top home in western North Carolina and listen to NPR, and be inspired to think great thoughts as I take in the spectacular views.

On the morning of June 21, during this ritual I heard a report about a Connecticut third generation restaurant proprietor, whose family operate a pizzeria, and had been pursuing the practice for generations of having the family's children work in the business. It seems that recently they received word from the State of Connecticut authorities that they had to cease and desist the practice of providing character building experiences for their kids by having them work in the family business.

I was very touched by this report overall, and especially the father of the family telling the NPR interviewer that "...I learned more from working in the family business about the importance of family, respect, integrity, and hard work, than I could have in any college or university." Well, that really captured my attention and imagination.

So what if we set out in college to teach "the importance of family, respect, integrity and hard work"-- could we do that intentionally if we aspired to? And, if so, how?

In practicing my ever-constant mental life where the questions are almost always more important than the answers, I recalled that as a young man I learned that if properly taught, we human beings can be taught just about anything. I learned this when I was in US Air Force basic and officer training. My drill sergeant would say such things as: "*Expletive deleted*, listen here! Do you want to survive Vietnam?" And the only acceptable answer, in unison, was "Yes Sir." He would then go on to recite his mantra: "There are three ways of doing things: the right way, the wrong way, and the Air Force Way. And I am gonna tell you what I am gonna learn ya'; and then I am gonna learn ya'; and then I am gonna tell ya' what I learned ya'!"

A few years later, after surviving the Air Force and coming to the University of South Carolina, joining the faculty, and getting involved in the training for University 101, our innovative first-year seminar course, and then becoming the director of University 101, I came to the realization that I was an academic version of my drill sergeant. My job was to teach them to survive, and to do so by teaching them the "Carolina Way."

This made me acutely aware that we could teach our entering students anything we wanted. The key was to be intentional about what it is we want to teach our students.

And so, yes, I believe we could have a college experience where we taught the importance of "family, respect, integrity, and hard work."

Alas, there is no evidence that college graduates have any more integrity and honesty than non college educated citizens. But I still believe that we could teach these outcomes.

I was inspired to teach this by a research project that was led by my wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, back in 2002 and in which I participated. This was an effort by our non-profit organization to identify so-called "institutions of excellence in the first college year" and to disseminate our findings. One of the institutions we discovered and honored was the US Military Academy at West Point. And there to my respectful surprise, we learned that the overarching desired outcome of its curriculum was "responsibility" and therefore that's what they taught. So, naturally I wanted to learn more about how they did so. And the Academy's personnel were ready, willing, and able to teach me how they do this. So I have become a believer. Here's one way they do this: every new student (a plebe) is assigned an upper-class student as a mentor. And if the plebe breaks a rule, does not perform up to expectations, then the fundamental question becomes: who is responsible? Answer: the plebe AND the upper class mentor! Just imagine

if we tried to put a system like that in place in our laissez-faire civilian campus cultures!

But, to wit: I believe we could teach the importance of family, respect, integrity, and the value of hard work. We could teach students anything we might want them to learn. So, what are we waiting for besides deciding on what we really want students most to learn?

Baptism as Ritual: What's the Analog in Higher Education?

7-2-10

I am moved to blog about baptism because I participated in one this weekend. As context, I confess that I am a thoroughly secular person and haven't gotten this close to an altar since I was a child. But recently my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I were asked by a mother of a new baby, to become the child's "godparents" and to participate in his baptism. This little boy, about six months old, had lost his father even before his birth, due to a plane crash which took the father's life. Betsy and I are very fond of the child's mother and so we gladly consented.

My self-concept is that I am a responsible adult but this request made me reflect why I had never been asked to serve in this capacity before-- maybe because this Christian custom is not all that common anymore, at least in my circle of personal acquaintanceship. Or maybe anyone who knew me well enough would assume my secular approach to life's most important transitions would not permit me to assume such a role. I don't know. But I am glad I agreed as I enjoyed the whole process: the rehearsal, the ceremony itself, the celebratory lunch to follow, and the realization of the importance of committing the whole village to raise the child.

Strange as this may appear, my mental thoughts standing there in front of the altar included:

- 1) my noting my respect for the importance of rituals to mark important life stage transitions;
- 2) my personal enjoyment of formalized rituals;
- 3) the role of ritual in binding people together in community;
- 4) raising the question about what, if anything, might serve as a counterpart to baptism for today's students as they enter our colleges.

And so I reflect: what would it mean to "baptize" entering students? Well, of course, we wouldn't want to use that decidedly Christian verb, particularly in governmentally supported institutions.

Some related questions:

1. How do we formally celebrate the entry of the group's new lifeblood, using ritual, song, reciting of creeds and important values, beliefs, candles, processions?
2. OK, so most of us don't. But would it make a difference if we did?
3. How do we gather the receiving community together to welcome the new entrants and to pledge our support?
4. How do we designate "godparents" which I guess would be the equivalent of some kind of mentors who commit to invest in the development of the new member?
5. And for those of us who don't do anything that might approximate any elements of the above mentioned kind of ritual, what informal actions do the students take to provide rituals for themselves because we aren't meeting this basic human need for them? That's right: all humans need and therefore create ritual, and have been doing so since the beginning of human kind. I hope your college or university has some kind of holy water to sprinkle on new students other than beer.

How About an Independence Day for New Students?

7-6-10

This is a blog written with July 4th in mind. This is the annual holiday to commemorate the announcement that Britain's 13 colonies in North America were separating from the British Empire. With all the references to the "Declaration of Independence" my thoughts this year included connecting this concept of a "declaration of independence" to the transition into college.

When we look at today's students transitioning into college, many are "independent" in that they are fully adult, self-supporting, highly focused and "decided." These are not students who are being supported by parents, although, hopefully, they are being encouraged and in that way "supported" by their significant others. And, of course, in contrast, there are still a very large number of students who are being supported by families. My point here is that our students enter at various points on an "independent" to "dependent" continuum.

But setting aside that gross difference, my mind has wandered to thinking about how could we mark at some appropriate point a "declaration of independence" for new students? At what point in the new student experience have they reached their readiness and ability to reject their former colonial overlords of immaturity, bias, prejudice, uncertainty about an academic direction, etc? Are there some markers that we could agree upon which would denote they have finally become autonomous members of the college community? They have arrived?

What would be the advantages of noting and celebrating the attainment of such markers? Well, affirmation and hence enhanced self esteem. Raised expectations and hence probability of increased student efforts and learning outcomes. Reduction of family anxiety about how their family member was transitioning, to name only a few.

We do, of course, or at least some of us do provide recognition and rituals for markers of growing independence and a form of "declaration", to wit:

1. Mid-term grade reports
2. End of first-term grade reports
3. Convocations
4. Orientation
5. Pledging and initiation into social organizations
6. Declaration of major (and thus having performed sufficiently well to gain admission to selective admissions majors)
7. Allowing students to move off campus after a residency requirement has been fulfilled
8. Being informed that conditions of exception for full, unqualified admission, have been satisfied
9. Learning that you have "made the team"

So, yes, we do have markers. But are these sufficient to have perhaps a more powerful impact that you have truly turned the corner, moved from your former High School Harry self and become Joe College? I don't think so. But what else could we do? And is this even worth thinking about? You tell me. I hope our annual holiday stimulated your thinking in some productive ways too.

Just How Far Would You Go to Help Students?

7-8-10

As a higher educator of 44 years, this is a question I have had to put to myself more than occasionally. My self-perception is that I am a tireless champion and advocate for students. But I know that even I have limits. Those have been tested, for example, when students have asked me to loan them money, or to engage, shall we say, in certain kinds of social interactions.

But as I read on the morning of June 23 an article in [The New York Times](#), page one, below the fold, I really questioned how far I would go or think we should go to help students! I posted a blog just previously in which I mentioned my morning ritual. Well, it also has included, since I was a first-year college student, getting and reading [The New York Times](#). When I was a new student, my political science professor “suggested” that I start making a habit of reading [The Times](#) daily. So I would trudge down town from campus in Marietta, Ohio, and get the daily [Times](#), after it came in from Pittsburg on the 11.22 Greyhound!

So the [Times](#) had a story reporting that in the last two years at least 10 US law schools “have changed their grading systems to make them more lenient.” Case in point driving this story: Loyola Law School of New Orleans is raising every student’s average by tacking on 0.333 to every grade recorded in the last few years. I couldn’t believe what I was reading. And not only Loyola, but such places as NYU, Georgetown, and Tulane. So why are they doing this? “The goal is to make [their] students look more attractive in a competitive job market.”

I still can’t believe it! There is no academic discipline more important to the future of American leadership than the law. The law is the major producer of America’s political leaders. Legal education therefore is extraordinarily, disproportionately important. And what’s the message here? Better grades by working harder? No, by simply showing up. And better grades because you were privileged, privileged to attend an institution which advantaged you vis a vis your peers.

Where will this go next? How about to the county’s greatest business schools? But where won’t it go? To English departments who are producing poets because our society doesn’t have to worry about protecting poets in this current job market.

So I find myself asking: what are my limits for helping students get ahead? What wouldn’t I do, or in this case, “stoop to.” OK, John, now let’s be honest, did you ever curve your grades? Yes, until I entirely stopped giving multiple choice examinations.

Thank goodness I am not in a power position where I could ever be faced with the decision to officially inflate grades of an entire cohort of students. As I found myself asking what are my own limits now, versus earlier points in my life, I immediately recalled a period when I was faced with an equally compelling moral question as to whether to inflate grades.

The period was 1967-68 and I was an adjunct instructor, teaching for the University of South Carolina at its Lancaster Campus, a two-year, rural, non-residential college, for students who were either textile mill workers or their children. And for my traditional aged male students, this was the period of draft eligibility for infantry service in Vietnam. And I was already on active duty in the US Air Force, having volunteered to escape “the draft.” I was doing this teaching at night, when I was off duty from my military duties as a psychiatric social worker.

And I recall that some of my male students would approach me and ask me to raise (i.e. inflate) their grades sufficiently to make a “B.” I had come to understand that the local Selective Service Draft Board, had raised the bar for a deferment, from simply being in college, to maintaining a B average. And it was true, the final grade in my course, was preventing some students from attaining that B average. This was a powerful moral conundrum for me. What should I do for my students? Here I was already a small cog in the huge killing machine that was the war in Vietnam; and now I realized I was also another kind of cog: a grading cog, whose grading made some men eligible for the draft.

I agonized over what I should do, but never could bring myself to raise a grade to maintain life, to keep a young man out of a stupid, senseless war. As you can surmise, hindsight is in full gear here. What would my limit be in terms of what I would do today for students? Well, not spare them from the draft. I just couldn't bring myself to inflate their grades. And I don't like any better this market driven grading philosophy. I bet we haven't heard the last of this, and I fear a very pernicious influence. So where are you going to draw your line in the sand? What are you not willing to do for students?

What Do You Want to Be Remembered For?

7-19-10

This past Saturday night my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I had a lovely experience: a former graduate student of ours drove about 125 miles one way to bring her husband and nine year old daughter to have dinner and a good visit with us. Betsy and I had taught this former student about 18-19 years ago and since then she has completed a doctorate and is having a fine career serving higher education. She was/is truly one of my very best all-time career students.

Certainly one of the greatest compliments any professor, or any other type of higher educator, can receive is to have a former student make an effort to come back for a visit.

But a question that occurs to me to reflect on is what could/should educators be doing with students NOW that might want to move those students to want to make such an effort in the future?

I can certainly attest to the fact that having such visits, or even correspondence, updates, check-ins, from former students has been one of the most gratifying outcomes of my career choice.

Like the majority of faculty, but unlike many administrators, I spent my entire higher ed institutional career in one institution—and I am very glad I did. And that was in a relatively small state (South Carolina) where it seemed that most of my former students never left. They just love the place, in spite of its appallingly bad political leadership. And so I found over my three plus decades in South Carolina that I was constantly running into my former students. And when I did, frequently they gave me feedback. But it was rarely about the subject matter that I taught them. It might have been about something they remembered that happened in class. Or something I made them do, like a memorable thought provoking assignment, or making them read something they never would have read otherwise (e.g. like [The New York Times](#)).

But more often than not, the feedback was about me, and something I had done for or with them. And it wasn't always much: the fact that I had "talked" with them; shown an interest in them; always remembered their name; pushed them; went on a field trip with them; helped them get a job. But it all can reduced to what I call: "the gift of self."

After all, college isn't really so much about learning "facts" as it is about learning how to learn, being inspired by adult professionals, being exposed to and encouraged by mentors, making that transition into the kind of adulthood that is more likely to come about for college graduates.

This has led me to conclude that you might as well be intentional about this: what is it about you that you want to give your students? For what would you want to be remembered 15-20-30-40 years later? Professors are very influential people during a period of very formative development for other individuals. We are going to be remembered. So we might as well be remembered for what we might want to be remembered for. It's all about being intentional in our behaviors and practices—but still natural and spontaneous.

So, what do you want to be remembered for?

What will you be remembered for?

How Could We Be Preparing College Students Who Want to Work in the Academy but Not for the Academy?

7-22-10

I am going to focus on perhaps a somewhat limited example of what I know is a much larger question, the one I ask above.

This is prompted by a visit I had the other day from a former student who has earned masters and doctoral degrees in the related fields of college student personnel and higher education. Most typically, people with these kinds of credentials end up working in higher education administration, either in student affairs or academic affairs. And many of them rise to very senior positions of leadership.

While I was at the University of South Carolina, later in my career, I was invited to teach one course a year to such graduate students; thus I learned more than I would otherwise about their background preparation levels, curricular options etc.

More specifically, I learned that these students had like being college students themselves. And they liked the idea of "helping students." And they liked college so much that they never really wanted to leave all the stimulation that that environment affords. And so they found a way of staying.

But I am finding that more and more of my former such students, who did enter the academy's work force, and now leaving it and going to work for corporations who sell products and services to college and university campuses.

Of course higher education is a huge sector in the US economy and there are many for-profit companies now whose entire, or substantial business product lines are designed for the higher education market. And somebody has to sell these products and services, and provide the training and support they need.

The Chronicle recently carried a feature story about all the companies that are now providing services that colleges used to provide, but have now outsourced: such as tutoring, counseling, housing, textbook stores, etc. There are at the very least here three compelling questions: 1) why are such professionals leaving the academy and entering the free enterprise system to seek their fortune? 2) should we be providing graduate level education and training to enable this transition more intentionally? 3) and if so, what would be teach such students.

I would venture a guess that there is not a single one of the more than 100 plus higher education/college student personnel degrees in the country that are doing anything specific to prepare their graduates for careers selling to the academy and supporting it through products and services.

Why are these professionals moving outside the academy? I would venture these reasons:

1. The corporatization of the American college and University culture has been so pervasive and profound, that the formerly attractive differences between the college and corporate cultures have been sufficiently reduced so that the advantage is no longer in favor of the academy. Colleges have truly become more businesslike and hence the previous view that the more humane and idealistic nature of the college life style somehow justified lower levels of compensation, no longer operate as a justification.
2. Corporate employers now too can offer flexible work hours; and even more opportunities for home based work and telecommuting. This is especially ideal for people who want a career and child raising simultaneously.
3. College administrators and student affairs officers live over the store. There are always demands that they be on campus at nights and on weekends. However, these corporate jobs largely lack these time demands.
4. For many reasons colleges lack the means to incentivize employees through merit pay and other fiscal incentives. That's not a problem for corporations.

5. The assumption that employment in the higher ed sector was more secure has gone. The Great Recession has taken care of that. Higher ed employees are now being laid off, furloughed, terminated in downsizing, just as happened to their corporate counterparts. There's one more former advantage of higher ed employment gone.
6. Same is true with the "benefits" side of the equation. There are now fewer and fewer academic jobs that are tenure eligible. The corporate life never afforded tenure. And when it comes to defined benefit plans, those are being scaled back too and hence there is no real practical difference between being a higher ed employee building a 430b account toward retirement versus a corporate employee building one's 401K.
7. Institutional loyalty to the campus is declining; no difference now from the company where there has been much less loyalty for several decades.
8. And corporate jobs may pay significantly more.

I don't see these trends diminishing, rather only be exacerbated. So, this tells me that more and more of our graduates who had aspired to non-teaching jobs in the academy, will increasingly not be making a career with us at all. As the academy outsources more and more previously core functions, the job market actually looks better to me outside the academy but servicing the academy.

So what is our responsibility to prepare our students for such important choices and to be successful in work outside the academy if they chose to pursue that? I think that more and more will.

What is it That We Do For Students That Matters?

7-27-10

I blogged the other day to raise a question of what would a faculty or staff member have to do to be remembered by former students with sufficient fondness and respect that a student would want to come back many years later to pay a visit to convey respect. This blog continues that theme.

I received a message today from a former student that leads me to reflect on “mattering” behaviors. What is it that we do, can do, to let them know they matter? Here is what one of my former students recently wrote me that prompts such reflection:

“I was so fortunate as an undergraduate at X and a graduate student at the University of South Carolina to have professors who really cared about not only their discipline, but their students. You have always stood out from my other USC professors to me; you not only challenged us intellectually (the case study exercise and presentation you assigned our class was the most engaging and rigorous of any of the other assignments I had in any other course), but you also encouraged us as individuals. We knew that you knew us, and that you cared about us. I remember you also took me to lunch after I graduated at the faculty dining room and advised me on investing for retirement! So in many ways you've been like a father (a young father!) to me, being someone I could seek both personal and professional advice and support from, and I have greatly valued that.”

When I read this, of course I recalled the student, the outstanding quality of her work, where she had gone to undergraduate school, what I recalled knowing about her family—but I did not remember at all, can't believe this now, that I took her to lunch, let alone advised her on planning for retirement! But what matters is that this student remembered, and it meant something to this student.

So, you never know what you have done, will do, until you get some reinforcement, specific feedback. I was fortunate, very fortunate, to have taught at a great university where we had a faculty development program for faculty like me to prepare us to teach our University 101 course. And we did have activities in such training to get us to reflect on, understand, and make commitments to communicate to students how they “mattered” to us. I am so glad I did. The best teachers are “made” not “born”. My university “made” me, and the above is one result.

So, what do you do to let your students know they “matter”? I am sure you do all manner of things that you may have no insight at the time that they matter, but they do.

A New Beginning

7-28-10

There are so many reasons that I am so glad I am an academic. And one that is very high on my list is that I constantly get the opportunity to have new beginnings. What prompts this observation and reflection is that tomorrow, July 29, I will experience another new beginning. This time it is not exactly like those I experienced every time I began a new school year at the University of South Carolina. But it is a new beginning for a new year with new kinds of “students.”

I refer to the fact that I am privileged to be engaged in the capstone work of my four decades long career in a new beginning each year whereby I get to work with a new cohort of four-and two year colleges who send teams to what we call “Launch Meetings”. These are held in beautiful Asheville, North Carolina, which has become most recently a site for presidential vacations (as in the Obamas).

These institutional teams convene to commence an approximate year long process of rigorously evaluating their institution’s entire approach to the beginning college experience, either for the conventional meaning of “new” students, and/or for transfer students. The goal of this rigorous evaluation process, a form of “assessment”, is to come up with an action plan to improve new student learning and retention. And then the most important part of this process is to actually implement the plan. We have learned that when colleges finally develop what they never had before—a plan—and then they implement it, well, very significant retention gains follow.

So to kick off this process I work with my colleagues to start another academic year for us by “teaching” these new “students,” who are really fully credentialed academics, how to do this kind of assessment. I have been doing this “launching” process now since 2003 and find it to be the most exciting work I have done in higher education. This overall process is known as “Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year” and/or “Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus” and will now have involved just over 200 institutions.

This week we do a two-day “Launch Meeting” for 12 four-year institutions, and then next Monday and Tuesday we repeat this process for 22 two-year colleges. And the cycle renews, so they can experience the challenges, benefits, and joys of institutional renewal, even in hard times.

Even when I was a college student myself, I came to realize that the academic lifestyle gave me the marvelous opportunity for “a new beginning” each year. After my first year of college, I especially needed one! Everyone, every institution needs new beginnings, renewal, a clean slate, that rare *tabula rasa*. I tell our institutions now, just what I have always told my students: what you do going forward matters much more than what you did or didn’t do in the past.”

Back in the 1980’s my colleague at USC, Jerry Jewler, and I wrote for our first-year students about this concept of “a new beginning” in a text for them entitled “College is Only the Beginning.” And therein we quoted from a Washington Post piece written by a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, Charlotte J. Patterson, entitled “With Fall, a Fresh Start.” I was moved when I first read her thoughts on a new beginning and I share them with you now to put this piece of mine in some kind of closing perspective:

“And that is why I like this day. For all its obvious, outward specialness, it is really no different from any other day. We are always ending something, and we are always beginning something else; we are always cherishing hopes and hiding fears, always searching for a new life and a new birth. Freshman arrival is a reminder that we are always, as Gertrude Stein once put it, “beginning again and again” --- that insofar as we are fully human, every day is always fresh. Freshman arrival changes everything, and it changes nothing; it makes us stop to look at what was always there for us to see.”

And as I look forward to my new “launch,” I realize that for these campuses with which we will be working we will be asking them to do exactly that: stopping to look at what was always there for us to see.

The New Normal

8-9-10

I know that some of my fellow educators look at some of our students and wonder if they have any idea of what is going on in the world and our country. I don't believe we should draw conclusions that they don't simply because of some of their behaviors which are less mature than those of my readers. My experience and plenty of national survey data on college students suggests that they do—and that they are rightfully concerned. And, so as they return to our campuses this fall, more and more commentators, including me, are making reference to what has become known as "the new normal."

The new normal assumes a long term period of very sluggish economic growth, structural high unemployment, poor job creation, continuing low inflation, and even the real possibility of deflation, destitute state budgets, lack of political support for more stimulus, and an obsession with the deficit which has created a tolerance for the suffering of the unemployed that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago—that is both the tolerance and the current prolonged level of unemployment.

So, as apparently more and more Americans are resignate to this state of affairs, both those with and without jobs, what are we going to be telling our students this fall about what they should be planning and expecting for their future, about the purposes of college?

How much do we level with them?

How can we encourage them and still be truthful to them?

A first step might be to get them to understand: 1) what is the new normal? 2) how did we get here? 3) what are options for us as a nation and as individuals, especially for our students who have not yet chosen careers and found a place in them?

Empathetic Recall

8-18-10

For 25 years at the University of South Carolina I was responsible for coordinating our twice a year University 101 Faculty/Staff "Teaching Experience Workshop." The purpose of this was to prepare our next cohort of instructors for the first-year seminar course.

One of the exercises we used was called "empathetic recall." It was really very simple. We would ask our newest "class" of seminar teachers to recall what they were like when they were a beginning college student; and then to contrast those recollections with how they see entering students today.

I continue to use some of the "trigger" questions we would use to undertake such a recall and comparison. I commend them to you now for your consideration as you prepare to greet this year's crop of incoming students.

1. What year did you enter college?
2. How many years ago is that?!
3. How old were you when you started college?
4. Who was President of the United States at that time?
5. Did the occupant of that office have any influence on your thinking about the world, our country, and your purposes?
6. Do you remember any major world event that happened that same year that really impinged on your consciousness?
7. Approximately, what did you pay that year – for a haircut, cup of coffee, a beer, a movie?
8. As you entered college, were you asked to read anything as some colleges do now in a "common read?" If so, do you remember what you were asked to read?
9. Do you remember your orientation?
10. Your first advisor? If so, what about him/her?
11. Any courses you took first term and how you performed?
12. Your room mate if applicable?
13. How you felt about your new beginning?

For me, the year was 1961. That was 49 years ago.

I was 17.

John Kennedy had been in the White House about six months and I already admired him greatly. And I was thinking about what I could do for my country.

The Berlin Wall had gone up that year and the Cold War was in full force and fury. And this would lead me to having to register for the draft, which today's students don't even know the meaning of.

I don't remember what I paid for any of those things, and I didn't drink beer or anything else. I do remember that gasoline was about 35cents a gallon.

We did not have a common read. But I do remember Orientation, particularly a picnic where I was so lonely. And I remember how much older the senior RA's looked, and wise, and suave and debonair. And I predicted I could never look like that. I also remember the orientation speeches punch lines, such as "Look to the left and look to

the right and the two you just looked at won't be here four years from now when you graduate!"

I remember my first advisor. At midterm he told me "you are the stupidest kid I have ever advised." What prompted this were my mid-term grades: 3F's, 2D's, and 1A.

My roommate was a big strapping football player, from Boston who was homesick for his girlfriend back home (so was I). And he was mailing his laundry back to his mother in Boston. One day, about 6 weeks into the term, he announced to me: "I am leaving college." And leave he did. I didn't know you could leave college.

How did I feel at the beginning of college? Lonely, "undeclared", homesick, anxious, depressed, lost. College kids like me needed help from people like you.

When you engage in empathetic recall, how do your incoming students match up? That is a fair question.

Succession Plan

8-20-10

I have recently gone through a “transition” exercise that is called “succession planning.”

There is a school of thinking that argues that great organizations must attend to succession planning. Some organizations do much better at this than others. I didn’t want to leave this to chance.

In my case there was no urgency about this. As far as I know, I am well and I can continue to “work” as long as I want. About 3 years ago for our annual audit, I was asked by the auditor what my succession plan was. His question took me quite by surprise. And I was actually a bit offended by it. But I realized he was doing exactly what good auditors were supposed to do: assessing organizational risk.

We created a new non-profit organization in spring 2007 and with it executed a very deliberate decision to try to institutionalize my work and especially the values it had been built on, in such a manner that this line of work with which I have become so associated, will outlast me and flourish long, just as my work has at the University of South Carolina after my retirement in 1999 (most there would say that my work has been more successful since I left than when I was there!)

Anyway, our Institute then decided to appoint a successor in waiting, an heir apparent—or at least to try to move in this direction. So we have done just that. And we will have an announcement about this September 1.

But I want to suggest something larger about this idea and something that is directed to you, my reader. If you were to be so fortunate as to influence the selection of your successor, what would be your criteria?

In my own thinking about this process, my criteria were these. I wanted someone:

1. With whom I would be personally comfortable.
2. Someone who shared my basic values in life, many in a full range, from educational, to family, to politics.
3. Someone who had extensive experience in undergraduate student success/transitions work.
4. Someone whom I could honestly call an intellectual.
5. And a gentleman or gentlewoman.
6. Someone with a strong sense of moral compass and ethics.
7. Someone who shares my vision for supporting students in transition, and our higher education system in transition.
8. Someone who is a good writer, thinker, and creator of potential new lines of work.
9. Someone who is entrepreneurial but without the down sides for the people involved that often characterize entrepreneurial pursuits in the for-profit world. In other words, a person who will always put people before money.
10. Someone who would treat my subordinates with respect and be both a wonderful colleague to work with and for.
11. Someone who shares my passion for social justice.
12. Someone who can take my work to the next level of impact, replication, and institutionalization.

And just who have I decided meets the above criteria? Stay tuned till September 1 for an announcement.

What criteria would you chose to select your successor? What elements of your work do you want to leave as a legacy for your successor to carry on.

Life Begins at 80

8-24-10

The other day my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I were over at a fine community college in eastern North Carolina near where Betsy grew up in Goldsboro. So it was easy for us to also pay a visit to her older sister, who is a fairly recent widow. She is a lovely and very smart person, and an extremely successful retail business entrepreneur, who is now essentially retired. She told me something I have never heard any other person of her vintage say: "I am 80 and I love it. I am free. I can do what I want. I know what life has brought me. I wouldn't want to be any of my former ages again. I like this one the best!"

Well, that really got me thinking-- and admiring her even more. Naturally, my thoughts turned to my career long cohort of charges, first-year college students. I got to wondering how many of them would be able to say "I love being a first-year student?" Or, "I am 18 (or 25) and I wouldn't want to be any other age." My experience both as a former new college student, and with thousands of my own first-year students, would suggest that most of them wouldn't say that they loved being a new college student or that they wouldn't want to be any other age. Excited about being a new student? Yes. Optimistic about finally starting college? Yes (for some).

I remember my own start. As I reflected in a recent blog, I was 17 and I certainly wouldn't want to go back and do that over again. And I was lonely, homesick, depressed, restless, adrift, very unfocused--and I definitely wouldn't want to do that again either.

So as you begin your work with new students this fall, take a good look at them. Try to imagine how they would respond to these questions I have posed above. While they may not be in any rush to be where you are, I suspect that most of them want to get behind them as fast as possible the beginning college experience. And you my reader may well be a key to helping them achieve this objective successfully.

A First: A Student Success Plan for First Year to Graduate School

8-31-10

I am more than familiar with plans to improve student success at the first-year and transfer student experience levels. That is primarily what I do professionally these days—helping campuses develop “[Foundations of Excellence](#)” action plans to improve student success. And we are finding that if a college creates a plan and then actually implements it to a high degree, then in the aggregate, institutions realize an 8.2% retention increase. But what I hadn't seen until recently was an action plan that spanned the entire undergraduate years and reaches into the beginning graduate school experience. Now I have seen such a plan and I am a believer that one can and must be created.

Specifically, I had the privilege and pleasure of visiting recently South Dakota State University in Brookings, S.D. Last year a substantial mass of faculty, academic and student affairs administrators created a plan to improve student success. In my judgment, they are doing everything right.

They began with a comprehensive assessment process, inspired especially by their NSSE data and their retention and graduation rate data. Then they created a concise vision statement as the core philosophical underpinning for the plan. This was followed by the development of 11 core values that will also be the basis for the plan.

They had a steering committee and eleven accompanying “design” teams to create the specific components of the plan. All the design teams have an equal number of academic folks (including faculty) and student affairs officers. At the top of the pyramid is a high level of integrated leadership and partnership between the chief academic and chief student affairs officers, both of whom happen to be women.

The plan starts with pre enrollment; moves into and through the first year; and has sophomore year, junior year, and senior year experience components. It has a plethora of programmatic elements so it is definitely not a one shot panacea, with a silver bullet.

The implementation of the plan is staged between now and 2014. This makes a great deal of sense to roll this out gradually and with measured assessment.

I was and am inspired by their vision, courage, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and commitment. I urge my readers to check this out and watch what South Dakota State University does. They will be worth watching.

Important New Collaborator on My/Our Work

9-3-10

On August 20 I posted a blog about some of my thoughts about how each of us goes about establishing a legacy. In that blog I also referenced some "succession planning" I had been doing to bring in a new senior colleague for the non-profit organization I have the pleasure and privilege to lead, our [John N Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education](#). I promised in this blog that I would make an announcement in early September as to the specifics of this appointment. Today, that's what I write about.

So, I can be relatively brief in the writing I do for this, because I am going to give you a link to a piece to which I have contributed already, namely, a press release about this appointment. Thus, it gives me great pleasure to introduce my readers to my new colleague in our Institute, [Dr. Drew Koch](#), formerly of Purdue University (and about 15 years ago, the University of South Carolina). I would encourage my readers to write Drew (koch@fyfoundations.org) to introduce themselves and offer him any advice for continuing and strengthening my work on behalf of American undergraduate education. To learn more about this special higher educator please see http://www.jngi.org/pressrelease_koch

Optimism: How are we going to teach it this year?

9-9-10

One of the ways I try to live my mental life is to avoid letting commercials register on my consciousness. To achieve this aspiration it means I watch absolutely no commercial television; try not to read billboards and ignore print ads. Admittedly, it is very hard to ignore these damn things.

Today, I failed while in an airport. I noticed a billboard featuring Michael J. Fox which communicated his courageous optimism that Parkinson's can be beaten. For some reason this led me to think about levels of optimism in this year's crop of new college students.

Perhaps I made this association because I have heard several anecdotal reports over the past few days of declines in community college enrollments this fall. These may be a mere blip of an exception to the pattern we have been seeing. But what has particularly caught my attention is the hypothesis being offered that students are so pessimistic about the economy that they simply don't see the value of starting college because they do not believe there will be jobs for them if and when they finish. So why take on all the debt and work?

Optimism, of course, is an essential part of the American ethos. It is fundamental to who we think we are. This makes me wonder this year, who is going to be more or less optimistic and what are the behavior patterns that college students are going to exhibit towards the growing sense of pessimism about "the new normal?"

At the risk of great oversimplification, I predict that the female students are going to work even harder, take even greater advantage of optional opportunities that colleges offer than they have been doing—all in contrast to male students. And, as for the them, I predict that we will see far more hedonistic behaviors—and to evoke that wonderful metaphor that Art Levine used several decades ago in his book [*When Dreams and Heroes Died: A Portrait of Today's College Student*](#), the image of college students partying on the deck of the Titanic.

So if we wanted to encourage or students this year of all years, to take more advantage of all the opportunities that college still holds out for the, how would we do that?

I have observed enough campus cultures to know that some have the culture of learned optimism, and some the opposite, learned helplessness. While I find that financial resources are related in some respects they are in no ways determinative.

Of course, it all starts with the attitudes of campus leaders. How can we project optimism and still be realistic and pragmatic? And it has to do with institutionalized core values that are public, prominent, and intentionally taught. Rituals matter too, rituals that inculcate students to consider lives of purpose and meaning that transcend their own individual measures of success. But where this optimism can be most directly taught is in the learning interaction settings where faculty and staff interact with students. This all comes down to you, me, us. And this year, we are needed more than ever.

College Made Me Vacation Like I Do!

9-7-10

I constantly think about the outcomes of college. How are college educated people different than non college educated citizens? In the [Foundations of Excellence](#) action planning I do with college campuses to help them develop a plan to improve new student success, we use an [aspirational standard](#) we call "roles and purposes." It asks institutions to measure how they are introducing to new students to the "roles and purposes" of higher education in general and the institution in particular. The idea here is that if we were more intentional and successful at this we could improve student motivation. And then if we improved student motivation they would be more likely to adapt the kinds of behaviors that lead to being more successful, like going to class for starters.

I know as a college educated person that that experience influences me in a myriad of ways, including what my wife and I do on vacations. And we are on an annual vacation and so this is on my mind.

So, what have we been up to? Well, we went to New England to attend three concerts at a [Jazz Festival](#) at Tanglewood in Lennox, MA. And we are going to two plays at the [Berkshire Theater Festival](#) in Stockbridge. And we are going to a favorite country inn, [The Inn at Shelburne Farms](#) on Lake Chaplain in Vermont. There we will achieve our definition of a great vacation which is to get a lot of pleasure reading done. And because I am college educated and developed the motivation to practice rigorous physical exercise discipline, I will more than double the amount of time and distance I spend running. And we will visit several museums and take in still another play. And we will venture over the US/Canadian border for a cross cultural experience in Quebec at another favorite inn, the [Manoir Hovey](#), where we can be treated like we are in France but with no accompanying jet lag.

And while I am on vacation, I plan to do something I learned to do in college, practice "reflection," the deepest kind of thinking on the current status of my life, and I am sure will generate some new ideas for personal and professional ongoing regeneration.

But perhaps the most important thing I am going to do-- I didn't learn in college: to disconnect myself electronically, ignore my laptop and smart phone. I didn't learn this in college because it didn't exist, that is the kind of technology we now have which both imprisons and liberates us.

Sometimes when Betsy Barefoot and I vacation we even practice "mystery shopping" of colleges we spot along the way. We see a sign for a college we haven't visited and we do the drive through tour and occasionally even go into the Admissions Office and interact and collect information. Now who but a college graduate would consider that a form of recreation?

Yes, I am aware every day that college shaped my roles and purposes and still does to this very day, for how I spend and derive meaning from every day, to the fullest. In the most generic of senses, I wish the same for my students.

Freedom: A Subject for More than Just a Common Read

9-24-10

I have recently returned from an eleven day vacation that was wonderful in part because I had such a change of pace. And while I love my normal non vacation "pace," this change was refreshing. And one thing I did much more of was just pleasure reading—3 books in 11 days. And one of them was this recent "hot" book Freedom by Jonathan Franzen. And I would recommend it for my readers.

I would recommend it not just because it is receiving a tremendous amount of current "play" but because it is just a good read, entertaining, insightful, provocative, and an incentive to personal reflection. I would also recommend it as a potential "common read" or "summer read" for entering college students. I say this because the book is about what I have always believed is the number one personal challenge for entering college students: the problem of freedom, freedom being an environmental characteristic which great colleges and universities give students a massive amount of, and more than many can handle.

As I have written in a previous blog, it was not until my own first college year, when I was made to read as a form of punishment, a book about the burden of freedom, the difficulties many people have in using it wisely, that I realized what an issue it was for me personally, and how it was shaping my own transition to college.

For me, this is an example of the lifetime impact of college. From that first year on, the question of the choices I make with my freedom is one I constantly reflect on, revisit, rethink, and also cherish. I have been so fortunate in my life and career to have been granted so much freedom, not only by my society, but also especially by my career employer, the University of South Carolina. Were it not for that, it, them, I would not have been empowered to create the first-year experience movement.

Anyway, this book, Freedom, is about the role of freedom on many levels: in an extended family—the choices they make; about how freedom is exercised by some college students who are characters of interest; the uses our country made of its freedom during the two Bush presidencies and how those choices affected this particular family and the country at large and more examples too. I believe that most entering college students could handle this work and see some of themselves and their families in it.

Over four decades of work in the academy, I have certainly learned more and more about what are the variables that either promote and/or impeded college student success. But my thesis that the use of freedom is the number one developmental challenge is still my number one choice for THE influencer. Freedom, of course, is all about purpose: the purposes of our students, families, institutions, and country. And it takes a great college education to empower and further free our students personally and intellectually to help them see the synergy between all those different manifestations of freedom and its associated choices—and obligations. So I recommend Freedom to you and your students.

Small Colleges Can Be Inspiring

9-23-10

This week on Sept 22-23, my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I spent working with teams from 36 independent North Carolina Colleges, all of them members of the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities. It was an inspiration—not that we were an inspiration for them, but them for us.

Betsy and I are both graduates of independent colleges, she from an elite one in North Carolina, Duke, and me from one that is not elite, but a fine place nevertheless, Marietta College in Ohio. While I like to think I really understand the small, independent college culture, I still got a powerful reminder yesterday of their cultural attributes which I can never be reminded of too much.

Our focus was on the importance of academic advisement. And the conference was held on the campus of Elon University. Talk about not needing a reminder! I send a contribution to Elon every year to continue my practice of “giving thanks,” as I have learned to say in the South, to Elon for the marvelous academic advising it provided my son, Jonathan Gardner, during his four years there from 1994-98. Yes, I am still sending them money in honor of his two academic advisors, one his faculty advisor, and one his professional staff advisor. So one of my criteria, for what I have developed and call an aspirational plan for outstanding academic advising, is that a campus create the kind of advising culture whereby graduates and their family members will contribute years later in memory and appreciation of the outstanding academic advisement they received.

I believe that independent colleges are especially well suited to deliver this kind of promise and outcome. I think that what especially amazed and inspired me in the course of spending two days immersed in this culture, was how much these educators can and do with so little money. Incredible. This reminds me that some of the most important things students need, like attention and affirmation, and just good counsel, don't necessarily take money.

I was reminded of how student centered these places are. How entrepreneurial they are! How risk-taking they are. How extensive is the experimentation they are engaged in to find new ways to promote student success. How much encouragement senior administrators give to subordinates to bring good ideas to them to find a way to support and try out. Much as it saddens me to see the ravages of the Great Recession on our public campuses, and the resulting impact of cuts on support for functions like advising, I do see this as an opportunity for independent colleges to further accentuate their strengths and differences.

Now, as a point of perspective, I hasten to add that I was a full-time employee in public higher education for 32+ years and we are doing many good things for students too. But there really isn't anything quite like this independent college culture. And I believe the existence in our country of a higher education sector comprised most broadly of not-for-profit colleges of both public and private control, is good for both sectors. Our differences help keep us honest, and on our toes. And we all benefit from the awareness of the other. I know that I benefitted from the inspiration Betsy and I received from our North Carolina independent college colleagues sharing with us how much they do on so relatively little.

Where are the Men? Not Dealing with the Male Problem!

9-30-10

It seems to me that for the past several decades I have become so accepting of this campus demographic characteristic that I often don't even notice any more. Where are the men?

Recently, as I was starting my late summer vacation on September 2, and setting aside my efforts to keep up with my blog for several weeks, I happened to glance (which I rarely do) at [USA Today](#). And in the "Money" section, page one, below the fold, was the feature story "Single Women Out-Earn Single Men in Metro Areas."

The article went on to report ten major metropolitan areas where the percentage by which median full-time wages for single, childless women, ages 22-30, exceeds those of single childless men in the same age group—and these percentages ranged from a low of 12% to 21%. The cities cited were: Atlanta, Memphis, New York, Sacramento, San Diego, Miami, Charlotte, Raleigh Durham, Los Angeles and Phoenix. So what was the big explanatory variable? No question, by far, the amount of education completed.

This was not "news" for me. It was simply confirmatory of the patterns I have been observing for decades on my own campus and almost every one I ever visit.

Who is more likely to go to college? Be retained in college?

Graduate from college?

Assume leadership of student organizations?

Volunteer to serve other students and community members? Take advantage of opportunities for extra credit, initiative, etc?

Who is less likely to vandalize institutional property, drink excessively, or sexually assault another student?

On a campus visit I made almost twenty years ago in a focus group of campus leaders, all volunteers, and almost totally devoid of men, I asked "And where are the men?" One female student responded: "Sex, sports and booze, that's where they are!"

And then I think: well, who runs the majority of campuses anyway? Still men. Surely they see what I see. So why don't they do anything.

Perhaps they are afraid of their feminist colleagues who, like my smart and very fair wife, Betsy Barefoot, have little sympathy for these men who aren't making it and who rightfully ask why we should have such sympathy for men when they still run the country and had the same opportunities, actually greater opportunities than the women.

But this issue of less functional men surely has to be difficult for us men to want to recognize, accept as a significant and harmful trend, and attempt to respond to in some concrete manner. Occasionally, I do hear of institutions that have launched "male initiatives." And I have visited a few, such as Medgar Evers College and Hobart and Williams Smith Colleges. But they are still a rare minority.

Blog: Memories are Made of This!

10-4-10

There is no denying it, my 25 years as a director and professor in a first-year seminar program and course had a great deal of influence on my understanding of and thinking about college students, and the larger academy. But for the last eleven years my work has been focused laser like on the larger higher education community and how to improve how it influences student success. However, I still find myself constantly thinking of ways to directly influence students. And the other day I had another inspiration in this regard. So this blog is really going to return me, very briefly, to my days as a first-year seminar instructor when I was constantly looking for new pedagogies of engagement.

For six years at USC I worked with another full professor, Jerry Jewler, to co-direct University 101. Jerry came up with many wonderful ideas to strengthen our course. And one of them was the concept of “weekly letters.” Now keep in mind this was in the era (1983-89) prior to e-mail. And while we had long practiced “journaling” in our University 101 course, Jerry adapted this to the idea of having each student write their instructor a “weekly letter,” the old fashioned way. And the instructor would “frame” the focus of the letter. Each letter was required to be no longer than one page, have an introductory paragraph, body and conclusion. And each instructor was required to read the letters and return same, manually, to the students at the next class period, with feedback. The whole point of this was to use this writing as a personal and private platform by which to develop a relationship and also to be a kind of “early warning system” to alert the instructors to potential problems for which some kind of intervention might be appropriate.

One opening fall term, I asked the students to write their weekly letter on this topic: “What is the most significant thing that happened to you during your first week at the University?” Two of my students wrote that their most significant experience had been that they had been raped. How would I have known had I not asked? Where in the world am I going with this blog? Well, to the present, and then back to the past, and then to the future.

The other day I received in the mail from a dear “kissing” cousin of mine, a woman about 70, a packet of handwritten letters, which she had discovered in a treasure trove of materials set aside in an attic by her late mother, my former aunt. These letters were those I had written my aunt in my later high school years, first year of college, senior year, first year of graduate school, Air Force days, spanning not quite a decade.

At first I was reluctant to even look at one. But then my wife, Betsy Barefoot, started reading them one by one, and quoting from them liberally. So I got my courage up and ventured in myself.

I have found this to be an extraordinarily powerful and meaningful experience. As I have written previously, I know I am “aging into wisdom.” But then isn’t that an objective of all stages of education?

I had all kinds of reactions:

1. What I know now that I didn’t know then.
2. Then the jury was out; now it is in.
3. What were my developmental issues then; how was I handling them?
4. My attitudes and outlooks struck me as the same as they are today.
5. Character gets formed early and deeply.
6. Communication is a lifetime pattern. I communicated then as I do now.
7. I really cared about relationships. And I still do.
8. And more.

As I was reading these I couldn't help but think: wouldn't this make a wonderful exercise for students in a first-year seminar course? Have them write some "letters" (e-mail would be fine) to people in their lives whom the students would ask to save these messages and at some later point in life share them back with the sending student. Part of the value of this, of course, would be the thought process the student would have to go through now to tell the significant others just what they, the students, thought was the impact, meaning, import, of the college experience now. Of course, this is a strategy to engender a more powerful and deeper learning: reflection.

I suspect that students would enjoy both the initial process and then the retrospective years later. And they would obtain additional practice in reflective writing. They can never write enough, or too much. That was and is a core belief of Jerry Jewler and me.

I Have Seen the Future and the Future is Us

10-8-10

I have visited over 500 campuses in my career and after visiting a place I always leave with some kind of dominant impressions implanted in my brain. Last week I had such an occasion.

I visited McAllen, Texas, and South Texas College. McAllen is a border city with Mexico, in a region just inland from the coast and known as "The Valley," south of Houston. While Texas has had community colleges for decades and some really big and prosperous ones in Houston and Dallas for example, this community did not get a community college until 1993 when South Texas College was founded with a founding President, Shirley Reid.

The assumption had been amongst Texans with the power of the purse, that this region didn't really need a community college. Why after all, these locals, large numbers of them from recently across the border, were just going to be laborers at best anyway. So why bother? Thank goodness that has changed. Before the college was founded, unemployment ran as high as the mid 40's. Now, while admittedly the community has been negatively impacted by the Great Recession and the fears of cross border drug related crime, nevertheless, graduates from the College are finding employment in highly remunerative fields which are providing entre into the great American middle class.

But what amazed me the most was this: from zero students in 1993, the enrollment is now in excess of 30,000 students, with over 2000 employees at six different locations. The College held all campuses convocation to hear an annual address from their firebrand leader and there was no room large enough on any campus to accommodate all the employees.

While in town I took a late afternoon jog in the mid 90's late September heat. I do this to stay ahead of all the young people who want to take my place. Actually, it wasn't so bad. There was a lovely tropical breeze blowing off the not too distant water. I ran on the shady side of the main street, maybe 20 blocks up and back and passed many other pedestrians like myself. The city was bustling and I heard much conversation, but not a word in English. And I was the outsider. I was the "minority." I rarely am that, but know what to do as I lived in Canada for five years when I was a kid and truly learned what it meant to be a "minority."

So what did I see and learn on this visit and run? I learned that McAllen and South Texas College are the future. The future is here and it is us. We are creating a whole new kind of country.

And I loved observing the indigenous. All the working people I interacted with in the hotel and restaurants and then on the campus—well, they had hustle. They were finding dignity in their opportunities, their work, their roles. They showed initiative, respect, manners. They were gracious. It made me want to come back. It made me optimistic about our future. I'm glad I went.

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Reflecting on the Tragedy at Rutgers: A Tragedy for All

10-11-10

It is not as if we need any reminders that our campuses are not the sanctuaries we would like them to be. I hope all of my readers are thinking about how this tragic suicide of the Rutgers first- year student after a fellow roommate outed him by grossly violating the privacy and dignity of another human being, applies to your campus situation, and your ability to influence anything for students. Sadly, this is an extraordinary teachable moment.

There are so many issues raised by this chain of events. In retrospect, they remind me of a teachable moment I had in a first-year seminar once that fortunately, did not end in tragedy. But it did raise the issue of homophobia on the college campus.

One class day in my teaching of University 101 at the University of South Carolina, I took my class of 20 some students to an annual event: the Student Activities Fair. This was an opportunity for new students to meander around a large exhibit area in the student center ballroom, where over 400 clubs and organizations had set up booths to explain their purposes and activities to interested prospective student members. I took my students there as a way of helping them make a decision about how to fulfill a course requirement I had long imposed.

The requirement was that each student join at least one co-curricular organization; show me some form of proof of membership; and write me at the end of term a short paper documenting the value of this membership, what had been learned so far, etc. I had instituted this requirement after learning about research outcomes documenting the correlation between joining such organizations, as long as the activities were legal and sanctioned by the institution, and retention.

So, one beautiful fall day I took the class to the Activities Fair. They were allowed to mill around for an hour or so and then I led them back to our classroom (the class met once a week for three hours). Upon returning to that space, I asked them my favorite question after any experiential learning activity (a question they already had learned to predict I would ask): "What did you learn?"

Without any hesitancy, an eighteen year old white male shot up his hand and I called on him. His response: "I learned that I didn't respect you any more!"

Naturally, I wanted to draw him out, instantly sensing this could be an extraordinary teachable moment but having no idea where this comment came from or could go.

He explained to me and the class: "Until I went to this event I thought you liked girls" And I then asked what I had done that made him think I did not "like girls". And he elaborated that this perception changing event had been the following: "Well, you see I saw you standing for the longest time talking to the students at the Gay Lesbian group table and I could tell you knew them and were enjoying talking with them."

Well, what I had intended for the class topic to be, the merits of joining a co-curricular organization, and which ones to consider, suddenly became a very new topic for the day: the status and nature of homophobia on that particular campus.

What ensued was one of the most powerful class discussions of my career. I followed the discussion by making the students write a reflection paper on what they had observed and learned from the discussion. A common theme was an increased understanding of the correlation between homophobia and race, ethnicity and gender--- with the most homophobic being the white males. This is, of course, only one of many observations and insights to be derived from the Rutgers tragedy.

The Most Inspiring Meeting I Attend All Year

10-13-10

There is no doubt about it, I am a conference junkie. And the best meeting I attend on an annual basis is one with a rather non attention grabbing name: the [Foundations of Excellence Winter Meeting](#). My criteria for “the best” is really twofold: the inspiration and gratification I receive from attending.

So, what is this “Winter Meeting”? Well, it is an annual convening of institutional teams from two and four- year colleges and universities, who either have been or are currently participants in the [Foundations of Excellence](#) self-study and action planning process to improve new and/or transfer student success. At this meeting we bring together higher educators who have both developed and implemented the Foundations of Excellence Action Plan and integrate them with those that are just going through the planning process. We want the former cohort to inspire and mentor the latter, and they do. And they all inspire me, the veterans and the novitiates.

We have had 167 [institutions](#) go through this planning process and are working with 35 more this year. Recent externally conducted [research](#) on Foundations of Excellence outcomes, as I have written about previously, has determined that for those institutions that create the FoE Action Plan and then implement it to a high degree, realize in the aggregate, an 8.2% increase in retention. Amazing, but it’s happening.

This year we are encouraging fellow educators who have not yet participated in Foundations of Excellence to participate in the annual Winter Meeting. I predict they will be inspired to emulate the big idea—whether they do the big idea with us or not. So this invitation is not shameless commerce. The big idea of course is to develop a plan for institutional improvement and then actually implement it!

The Winter Meeting will be held this year on Friday, February 4 in Atlanta. [Click here](#) for more information. February is the time of the winter doldrums. We all need to be rejuvenated and that is a great time and a promising context. Trust me.

The Movement is Spreading and Deepening

10-18-10

A sign of the institutionalizing of any educational reform movement, of course, is the spreading and deepening of the activity in terms of adoption and success. The “movement” I am most interested in is the so-called “first-year experience” or “college success” or “student success” movements, which I am sometimes credited with launching. I did play a role in that, for sure, but I certainly had a great deal of help, especially from my colleagues at the [University of South Carolina](#), and later from the [Institute](#) which I founded.

One manifestation of this “spreading and deepening” is the slow but gradual proliferation of state and regional convenings of higher educators that I and my two non-profit organizations focused on student success have NOT organized and hosted.

There are such initiatives flourishing now in the states of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, and Ohio; and now a newcomer, but a real “comer”—in Massachusetts which is a gathering for the entire New England region.

I participated in the [First Annual New England Student Success Conference](#), organized by my friends Robert Feldman and Mark Lange and their outstanding team at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Their first gathering was held on October 8 and had as an original planning goal 250 attendees. It was “sold out” and “closed” at 300. Talk about demand. When I left the meeting, the organizers were already planning next year’s gathering. If you are interested you should contact either of those gentlemen. I recommend you request from them a link to the session materials. I attended two sessions which were both outstanding: one by a splendid team from Framingham State University who illustrated how to translate a complex action improvement plan into sustained implementation to reap increased student success and retention (about 10%); and the second by Jane Wellman, the provocative and profound scholar of higher education cost assessment. We all need to take her advice and start assessing the cost benefits of our first-year initiatives and we will be inspired by the results of her model for doing so.

I think it is most fitting that the region where “the first year” in American higher education began in 1636 has its own “network” for which the foundational steps were laid at this first meeting. There is nothing like local grass roots action to institutionalize any movement.

Congratulations from a recovering former Yankee to my New England colleagues who are moving to the next level in promoting student success.

What Would it Take?

10-20-10

I am writing this post on an airplane flying back across the Atlantic from a wonderful 10 day vacation with my wife, Betsy Barefoot. We have been in France precisely because it is the "Old Europe" at its best, just what Donald Rumsfeld so despised. But it is also a country well known for its propensity for wild cat strikes, protests and civil disobedience. And we certainly picked a good week to be reminded of this long tradition. And this was the first October vacation I have ever taken since becoming an academic 44 years ago.

Ah, the spirit of the French Revolution lives on, especially in the young people, university students, who despair of losing the French way of life: the 35 hour work week, an enormous number of paid holidays, and full retirement benefits at age 60. France's Prime Minister has caused a firestorm by requesting the National Assembly to approve legislation raising that retirement age to 62 and this has unleashed a tumult of strikes and protests. While we were there last week, a serious fuel shortage developed disrupting air service, road travel, and other unions launched a devastating series of rolling strikes of the railroads. To put it mildly, daily life became totally unpredictable. But this set me wondering.

First of all, there's a warning here for any American politician who would drastically meddle with the people's entitlements!

But what about American university students? What would send them into the streets opposing something? It has long appeared to me that they will put up with just about anything. At least they Tea Partiers are out protesting. Sure, we do have student activists in our country, but they strike me as a passive lot compared to what I just observed during my visit in France. What could possibly get them stirred up?

Not the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. Not the President's proposed plan to eliminate the Bush era tax cuts for the wealthiest of taxpayers. Not the Obama administration's clamp down on proprietary schools which educate about 10% of our students but absorb about 25% of our federal financial aid budget. Not the Republicans' blockage of any more stimulus money which might jolt the economy back to life and provide some jobs for recent college graduates. Not any of the many state and local actions being taken to restrict illegal immigrants, all in the absence of federal policy. Not the Administration's new health care legislation which will ultimately mandate current students after college and age 26 to purchase health insurance.

Just what will it take?

I remember what it took: the draft. How I long for the return of the draft. I would love to see the students out in the streets again. I would love to see the children of our Congressional leaders subject to the draft. But that's a pipe dream, John. Our students have been co-opted. They've bought in.

I am definitely concerned about the level of anger I see in my fellow citizens; and it dismays me. Some of it I feel is entirely justified. But I don't see much of it in our students. What would so anger them that they would be moved to action?

So, I return to the question. What will it take?

I don't know. I just don't know.

15 Triggers for Discussion

10-21-10

Recently a special colleague of mine who was organizing the [First Annual Conference on Student Success](#) held at the University of Massachusetts, about which I wrote recently, asked me to provide a talk but in a new and very challenging context for me: with a very strict time limit. The idea was I was to have only fifteen minutes. And further, I was to present catalysts, “triggers” for interaction, conversation to follow.

So I had to ask myself what I could say very concisely that reflected ideas/topics I was thinking about, working on in my professional life. This turned out to be an interesting exercise for me to construct such a list. And I recommend that you consider doing the same. You could even shorten the list. What are the ten (or five or fifteen) big ideas that you are focusing on in your work; or that you think your institution should be focusing on. As an illustration, here is my list that I recently offered. I am sure that this would change on any given occasion that I might be given this opportunity. Your list also should always be dynamic. I invite you to compare yours with mine.

Here goes:

Fifteen Minutes: Fifteen Triggers for a Dialogue on Improving Student Success

1. It all comes down to your values: The first-year matters!
2. And, yes, there is a sophomore slump!
3. The transfer student experience has become normative; transfer students are a cohort about which little is understood and towards which much prejudice is directed.
4. The Senior Year Experience is needed too! Some students are never over the hump.
5. Where does your campus stand with respect to offering the three most validated retention generating interventions: first-year seminars, learning communities, and Supplemental Instruction?
6. What is needed is “challenge and support,” and more of each! Engagement is all about raising expectations and achieving greater time on task.
7. All students are “developmental.” All are at risk. We must improve the status of “developmental education.”
8. What’s wrong with this picture? We search for the holy grail of retention, even though it is merely a minimum standard.
9. In contrast: pursuit of educational excellence and the need for aspirational standards.
10. Want to improve retention? The latest powerfully documented intervention – the latest big idea: you need a plan. And then you need to implement the plan to a high degree (yielding 8.2% increase in retention). “Programs” are necessary but not sufficient. We have to transcend mere “programs” and make these plans part of the overall vision, part of the institutional strategic plan.
11. Re-examine policies that at one time made eminent good sense but now may have outlived their usefulness: “Waiting for Napoleon” as an illustration of the need to do a “policy audit” and for focusing on what you can control
12. You have to have a manageable focus for improvement efforts. Try the five highest enrollment courses with parallel redesign for high DWFI rate courses
13. Show me your list of institutional standing committees and I will know what you value. Each campus needs a standing group to advocate for first-year students.
14. Go after the “low hanging fruit.”
15. One person can make a huge difference

It's All About Social Justice

10-25-10

I often wonder, as do all educators, what really sticks with a class or an audience? I really pour myself into both the preparation for and delivery of a classroom, workshop presentation or speech. Usually, I get some kind of verbal and written feedback. But I have to wonder, what is it that really might last? When I lived in South Carolina, which is like one great big extended family reunion, where everyone knows everyone, I used to run into my former students constantly, never failed. Good thing I was always on my best behavior and a good ambassador for the University! After hundreds of these kinds of serendipitous meetings and exchanges I came to conclude that what my students remembered most, was me, and especially what I stood for, some kind of core values. And for many of them, they found me quite different in that regard.

A few months ago I did an all day workshop with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and at the end of the day, one of the participants gave me verbal feedback that what I had done/said that day that had meant the most to her was sharing a personal statement of my philosophy of education (about which I have blogged previously).

Recently, I gave a speech and several members of my audience told me in strongly worded statements of appreciative feedback that what really grabbed them was my reminding them that the bottom line of what all our work on student success is about, what it all comes down to, is social justice.

I reminded this audience that the movement for "student success" grew out of the convergence and interaction of multiple parallel historical and social movements in the early 1970's:

- *the civil rights movement

- *the women's rights movement

- *the anti-war movement

- *the students' rights movement

- *and more specifically: the desegregation of US higher education, and the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Higher Education Act (especially Title IV to provide Federal financial aid)

All of these can be described in summary as a grand national effort, albeit an incomplete experiment, to bring social justice to more of our citizens (and now recent immigrants who are not yet citizens).

And this effort to promote social justice through higher education is not done. It is ongoing, needed as much, and in some ways, more than ever. So, yes indeed, social justice is what this is all about.

I wish more of us would use this language more often. Given the political polarization of our country and the hi-jacking by the right wing of previously respected concepts and ways of thinking (such as "liberal"), most of our higher education leaders are so careful in their chosen public utterances that they rarely use this language. What a shame. This is still what it is all about.

So let's hear it for social justice.

I Have Seen the Future and it is Here # 2

11-1-10

Recently, I wrote about a late September visit I made to McAllen, Texas and South Texas College; and shared my observations that the demographics I saw there, with the attendant inspiring energy and hopefulness of the new immigrants I observed, and how they were transforming higher education in the region. For this post, I report on a more recent opportunity to see another glimpse of the future, which is also already here.

This academic year, I have the privilege of advising three constituent colleges of the City University of New York, all in the same borough of the city, the Bronx: Bronx Community College, Hostos Community College, and Lehman College. The latter college is what in CUNY speak is known as the “senior college” and receives transfer students from the other two borough feeder colleges. Together we are working to improve both the success of “native” students and transfer students. The two community colleges are engaged in our Foundations of Excellence self study and planning process to improve the performance of their new students. But Lehman is engaged in our Foundations of Excellence “Transfer Focus” to improve the success of transfer students coming to Lehman from Bronx and Hostos Community Colleges.

Together, these three colleges and our Institute have a great opportunity to improve the public good in this dynamic borough of the city of New York.

The future I saw, now the present reality at Lehman, defies the stereotypical, historical picture of what our colleges do. The lay public view of American higher education, unfortunately, is still that the academy is predominantly for students who come to college, stay four years, live on campus, get a degree and move on. My readers know this doesn't square with reality. Exhibit A: Lehman is the new transfer institution. It's now archetypal student is the transfer student. Last fall it admitted approximately 850 “new” students and approximately 1850 transfer students. To say that it is dependent on transfer students is an understatement.

Lehman, of course, is not unique in this regard. But it is quite unique in its current commitment to develop a coherent plan to improve the performance of its new majority: transfer students.

It has been my experience in many such institutions, where the transfer students now outnumber native students, that the dominant culture of such institutions (Lehman excepted) is still one organized for native students and where the assumption is they still predominate, even though they don't in numbers, but do in influence. This is an example of colleges acting like the colleges they used to be, not the colleges they have actually become. Surely we can do better.

Admittedly, this is a complex problem (understatement). We cannot improve US graduation rates unless we improve degree attainment by transfer students. But colleges don't receive public recognition for such a commitment because retention and graduation rates of transfer students don't “count” in the Federal government's tracking system for public reporting. The end results of this is that colleges court transfer students for their body count and tuition, fee, and funding formula dollars, admit them, but then largely neglect them and leave them to sink or swim in a college culture designed for native students. The end result is an enormous set of challenges for students seeking transfer, particularly in obtaining equitable and consistent treatment for transfer of credits. Unfortunately, in most states, rather than having transfer being systematized so that it is predictable and equitable, instead it is unpredictable, ad hoc, inconsistent, and often capricious and arbitrary,

leaving enormous autonomy and power to individual faculty at “receiving” colleges to determine award of transfer students on an individual case by case basis. The potential for abuse based on prejudice in this model is enormous.

For Campuses Who Can't Go Greek, How Can They Do Greek?

11-3-10

Approximately a year ago, I posted a blog where I reflected on fall being the traditional time in the traditional American college for "homecoming." I recognized that this cultural ritual of students returning to alma mater to have reunions with former faculty and fellow students, really is an anachronism in the new American colleges which serve large numbers of "swirling", transfer, non-traditional students. I asked what would it take to bring today's students back for such reunions and develop similar powerful affinities with their former colleges? So I am not going to ask that now, although I am reflecting on that again.

This is prompted by my participation recently in my 45th class reunion, for the Class of 1965 at Marietta College. And I was reminded again of what powerful loyalties such colleges and their rituals and ceremonies evoke. I certainly am influenced by this culture. This time I took special notice of the lasting influence on former students of their "Greek" experience.

I don't think I have missed a five year reunion marker since I graduated in 1965. I am really hooked on these things. And I have known for decades both intellectually and personally about the power of the so-called "greek" social groups on American college campuses. Even though their student membership numbers have been in free fall for the past several decades, their remaining numbers continue to exercise an influence on campus culture far greater than their mere numbers would suggest. Why are their raw numbers declining? Primarily cost. But in addition, parents of traditional aged college students, and many students themselves, are concerned about the image of such groups and attendant liability risks. And many students conclude they don't need such groups to have a good social life. And now there are many other opportunities on campus for students to socialize with fellow students with whom they would constitute a homogenous group in terms of special interests.

At my most recent reunion I was reminded again of these impacts/outcomes for fraternity/sorority membership:

1. Identity formation--once a "(fill in the blank with greek letters)", always one.
2. Powerful lifelong friendships
3. Powerful business ties
4. Enduring impact of behaviors, skills, and values learned in the organizational culture
5. Higher levels of loyalty and continuing affinity with alma mater as alumni
6. Higher giving levels by alumni
7. They learned in such groups how to do what they do now for a living: running America's for-profit businesses.

I realize I may be coming across as being very detached and analytical about this. So let me disclose that I did not join a greek group in college. But I did in my later career at the University of South Carolina where I served as faculty advisor to the chapter of Delta Upsilon for 16 years. During that time I allowed them to "initiate" me so I became a "brother".

Even though I am concerned about the downsides of membership in such groups (e.g. increased probability of alcohol abuse) I am very interested in generating some of the outcomes for greek students for all students, such as increased retention/graduation rates, increased alumni giving etc. But, the reality is that the replication of such groups in many of America's contemporary is just not

realistic. Students in commuter colleges cannot afford such groups, either their membership fees or the time commitments— and these are only the two most compelling reasons. In other words, these colleges can't possibly "go greek".

Character Building Experiences: Bring Back the Paper Person

11-10-10

And here is still another blog inspired by my participation in my just completed 45th college reunion.

Remember when this great country had what were called “paperboys?” You know, kids who delivered either morning or evening papers, through all kinds of weather, perfecting the art of the “toss” from their bicycle and saving their hard earned money for college.

I want to bring back paperboys, only I want them in the form of “paper persons” so that this noble adult-in- training temporary occupation is open to all young people, not just males. Just why am I thinking about this at all?

Well, two reasons really. For one thing, I am always thinking about what makes a student successful in college—or to lesser degrees the opposite. And while I think I really know most of what is to be known about this subject, I am always gaining new insights. This past weekend I had an experience to hear about and then think about a kind of father/son—parent/child experience that I am positive produced a successful college student and now citizen.

We all know what kinds of things the best parents do for their children, the examples they set, the sacrifices they make. I had occasion this weekend to talk to a friend of many years who came back to Homecoming at my alma mater, because her son had gone there, graduated ten years ago, and that son returned also this weekend to Homecoming to receive along with his wife, another graduate of alma mater, an outstanding young alumni award.

I have known this family for 25 years. And thus I have known this now 32-33 year old man since he was in elementary, middle school. And I remembered that when I first met him that he and his father had a paper route. Actually, it was the son's paper route. But the father got up each morning to get his son up to start that route at 4.30 in the morning, no matter what the weather in the suburb of Cleveland, Ohio where they lived. Just think of that: a parent getting up every morning of the year, at that ghastly hour, from the child's fifth through ninth grades. Just think of the discipline they both had. Just think of how they bonded. Just think of those early morning conversations.

I had the opportunity to talk to father and son extensively about this experience. I asked them what they would talk about on those early morning deliveries. And the son told me that his father would read to him from the newspapers to inform him of the news of the day.

And I learned that the son did save the money he earned—actually he “invested” it, in the stock market. And his father also taught him on those early morning deliveries the principles of investing, especially in stocks.

And I learned what he ultimately did with that money he had saved and invested: he bought a beautiful diamond wedding ring for his wife. And I saw that ring and her beaming loving face as we all recounted this story about how this was made possible. I also reflected that, in contrast, I was so opposed to wasteful spending on jewelry that my good wife, Betsy Barefoot, had to buy her own diamond ring!

This recounting of father/son bonding in the context of a paper route, made me reflect on my

parenting of my son. Did I help him with a paper route? Not on your life. Could I have? Yes, but I didn't. Never even occurred to me. I didn't hunt with him, or fish, or talk sports. What did I do? I read to him. Helped him with his homework. But mostly, I talked to and with him, constantly, openly, sensitively, liberally, lovingly.

Here's to the Enduring Influence of the Faculty!

11-8-10

I find myself writing a series of posts inspired by my brief participation in my 45th college reunion. This one is about another type of influence faculty have on students, a very tangible and lasting one.

My alma mater is a small, private, liberal arts college. In the past decade four new buildings have been built which have transformed this little campus and insured its prosperity and educational effectiveness for many more years to come. I had the occasion to see these new buildings this past weekend and I took them in with a sense of wonderment, awe, pride, respect, and great appreciation to those who made them possible. And all these buildings were built due to the generosity of alumni who have cherished memories of their times at alma mater, and especially of their faculty who were the ultimate inspiration of these gifts.

I have often reminded administrators that by and large students don't come back to see them at Homecoming. It's the faculty they return to see—and their fellow students of course.

I know we don't think of the faculty as the lead development officers, as the people who bring in the bucks. But at my alma mater they certainly have been. In the past decade, in large part due to the enormous generosity generated by five faculty, four magnificent new buildings have come on line as the result of four donors and their abiding love for certain faculty: a new library, new science building, new taj mahal rec center, and a planetarium. One of these buildings is even named for the two faculty that inspired the donor.

Just what is it that the faculty do for students who when they become really wealthy would want to give back in such a manner?

- The faculty were always there for these former students. They were in their offices available, willing, and interested to talk. And they did talk with these students.
- They had these students into their homes for meals and conversation and fellowship with their families.
- They encouraged, praised, pushed, prodded, affirmed, consoled, cheered, supported, guided, supported these former students.
- They liberated these students intellectually.
- They inspired these students to make a difference in the lives of others.
- They inspired these students to hang in there, stick it out.
- They never doubted these students.
- They were always there when needed.
- They maintained interest in these students for a lifetime.
- They showed these students how to return the gift.

Of course the modern college hires a cohort of professional development officers. But the ones that really bring in the bucks are the faculty. For this reason alone, how can colleges in good sense take any actions that actually offer disincentives to faculty to engage in more faculty-student contact? All this emphasis on pursuit of more research dollars now, which often takes time away from students now, is just one more example of the corporatization of the academy. It is an example of short range money making strategies, for reporting to the next meeting of the board. I can't but wonder if this doesn't interfere though with the long range funding interests of the institution, those gifts that will surely roll in years later, if only we have intentionally developed a campus culture where the faculty are allowed to do what they do best under ideal circumstances: serve as the real development officers.

Texting as Surrogate Touch

11-15-10

I am usually on at least one different campus a week and no matter where I may find myself, I always note the same: students walking around texting and/or talking on their hand held electronic devices.

I understand this. The allure of somebody reaching out to me to communicate something is indeed powerful. Somebody needs me. Somebody wants me. Somebody is giving me attention. I am noticed. I am affirmed. These are universal human needs and we have never before possessed such addictive ways of getting them met.

But I have to wonder if we could find other ways to meet student needs, to give them attention, reach out to them, affirm them, that might offset some of this constant need for electronic attention. I guess my even wondering about this reveals my nostalgia for days gone by when people on campus resorted to other means of communication. OK, let's say I accept this new age with no resistance. As I move on I still want to ask: aren't there other ways, more ways, that we could be paying attention to our students, letting them know they are noticed and important?

A Truly Invisible New Student

11-17-10

As I have written recently, I have just attended my forty-fifth college reunion. There I met a much more recent alum, a woman about 10 years out of college. We got to talking and after listening to me talk just a little bit about my work on behalf of first-year students, she asked me: "Well does your work do anything for students who have been raised in foster care?" I drew a total blank and responded in the negative.

She then asked me if I knew of any colleges in the US who had special initiatives to support the transition into college of first-year students who had been raised in foster care. She went on to explain to me that in many states these students are cut loose from state provided care at age 18 and left to fend for themselves.

I like to fancy myself as an advocate for unique cohorts of students in transition. But I had to admit that I had never given a moment of thought to the unique needs of this cohort of students in transition. And even worse, I couldn't think of a college or university that has or does.

Just when I think this movement has really matured, I learn of another gaping hole in our first-year of college social safety net.

We are fond of using the metaphor of "family" to describe our campus cultures. But what a different meaning altogether this could and should take on for students have no family. How could I have gotten this far in this line of work for advocacy and social justice and never thought of this population? Here I have spent over four decades thinking about the normative cohort who have just been "released" from the prisons we call American high schools who come to us like ex cons going wild with their new found freedom. And I have never thought of those who have just been "released" from foster care. How about you? What's your level of awareness, let alone potential interest?

Our Words Do Matter

11-22-10

Recently I wrote about how I had given a speech and used the phrase “social justice” as a way of characterizing the first-year experience movement in US and international higher education; and my point was to share the surprise and please reported to me by an audience member at the use of that phrase, because in today’s politically charged highly polarized US culture, we have been encouraged not to use all kinds of words and concepts. Our words do matter.

It is a shame that we are reluctant to discuss certain concepts with our students for fear of being accused of “politicizing” the classroom. The very act of abstaining from referencing certain concepts is certainly a form of “politicizing” the classroom.

I think not only of “social justice” as a term we avoid, but also the word “liberal.” Many of my colleagues are so intimidated about using this word publicly that they have become apologetic if they ever slip and utter it.

The same can be said, in some but fewer contexts, of the word “conservative.” But certainly it is far more acceptable to describe oneself as “conservative” than “liberal.”

I remember how we completely changed the meaning of one word in 1970: “busing.” Busing school children to school was as American as apple pie and had been for decades, until court action “forced” the use of “busing” to racially integrate the formerly de jure segregated public school system in Charlotte/Mecklenburg, North Carolina. And now millions of US parents drive their school age children to school instead of the alternative: busing. In fact, many parents enroll students in private schools to avoid busing and everything else they think goes with it.

Another term which I encounter frequently in higher education is the phrase “developmental education.” This is now used often as a pejorative to mean some kind of “remediation” that we should not be doing because students should have developed the competencies when they were in high school. This abhorrence for developmental education ignores, of course, that the offering of compensatory education has been offered in US post secondary education ever since the adoption of the Land Grant Act of 1862. Instead, this phrase has become contaminated with hot button political components having to do with the poor, race and class. What a shame that we cannot talk openly, proudly, about the need to provide social justice for hundreds of thousands of Americans beyond secondary school traditional age who need to be further “developed” to do college work.

Personally, I am tired of feeling constrained about using such language I intend to overcome such constraints and let the spirit move me in the spirit of academic freedom. Our students need to be introduced to such concepts and let them decide for themselves.

What Do Our Students Do for Privacy?

11-19-10

Please note I am asking: "What do our students do for privacy?" and not what do they do with their privacy. This question is prompted by several events, one of them tragic, and the other a recent discussion I participated in about this tragedy.

I refer to the suicide death of a Rutgers University first-year student, a promising musician, who jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge earlier this fall. His self-inflicted death came subsequent to his enormous humiliation when his privacy was violated by two of his fellow students who surreptitiously filmed him in behaviors he thought he was engaging in privacy. About 6 weeks later, I was attending a meeting of publishing editorial people at Bedford/St. Martins in Boston and we found ourselves discussing this tragedy and what it says about the need college students have for privacy.

One of the participants in that meeting, Bedford Editorial Assistant Karen Sikola, kindly forwarded to me subsequently the following quote from a recent edition of *The New Yorker*: "Young people discovering their identity and their desires need a zone of privacy where they can be who they are, perhaps in the company of another human being, without feeling that somebody else might be tweeting it, filming it, or blogging about it, or that maybe they themselves ought to be—there's such a thing as violating your own privacy, too. The unobserved life is so totally worth living." -Margaret Talbot

Read more at http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/10/25/101025taco_talk_talbot#ixzz131WEs3No
I really appreciated Karen sending me the above. Just think about this: "the unobserved life is so totally worth living." This has really pushed my reflective capacities!

I reflected back to my own beginning college days. How I hated the old style "dorm" living and its total lack of privacy. As an upper middle class child I had had my own room, and my own bathroom and many other forms of "privacy." Lack of privacy was a major adjustment for me in college. I also had to eat every meal communally with other people and couldn't even do that privately. There was, in fact, very little that I could do privately.

But I could and did spend hours walking the beautiful brick streets and parks, and river banks, of the historic river town in Marietta, Ohio, where I was fortunate enough to go to college. Those walks were my private time. They were times for reflection, which often lead to important actions. My whole college experience would have been different had I not made an effort to find privacy and use it constructively.

So this brings me to today's college students. Some questions:

1. What do they do for privacy?
2. Do they value it in their culture of share all and total transparency?
3. Given how totally and constantly "connected" they are, how do they find privacy should they seek it—that is privacy by means other than sleeping—i.e., awake privacy.
4. How could we inspire, encourage them to want to seek privacy as a context for their own development?
5. Could we provide any mental templates for use of the private time to structure some of their reflection?
6. How do we introduce to college students the merits of reflective thinking and teach and reward them for engaging in such?
7. One of the reasons I have been so drawn to service learning as a pedagogy is its inclusion of reflection as a mandatory component. How else could we be building reflection into our curricular—and co curricular learning contexts?
8. And finally, what do we need to do to protect students in their search for and use of their privacy?

So many good questions we need to be asking about our students, what they need, how we could or should support them.

2011

The Questions: They Are More Important Than the Answers

1-7-11

I am fortunate to work with colleagues in our Institute on Excellence in Undergraduate Education who are both constantly sharing good ideas with me, and also prodding me to do this and that. One prod has been for the first blog topic of the year. I have been wrestling with this. And I have been tempted by some many possibles!

I thought about how we might better capture the New Year's resolve of our students. And I have thought about whether this year is going to be better or worse for the academy than last. And I have thought about what were the uses I made of my holiday vacation and what should I learn from that. And on and on.

But I finally hit on it tonight when I was trekking through the Atlanta airport on my first professional trip of the new year. I noted a billboard that was sponsored by a chaplaincy group and it caught my attention with a really punch question: "What is your ultimate destination?" Now for a captive audience of airline passengers who often have good reason to wonder what their "ultimate destination" will be that day, as opposed to what they wanted it to be, now that is an opportune question.

This launched for me an immediate fantasy of the campus of the future where we might try to capture our students' attention with, yes, even billboards, but instead of selling them products and services, we would be asking them to consider important intellectual and personal questions and ideas.

So what if one of those we would pitch to them would be: "What is your ultimate destination?" Oh, I can think of so many more.

For me, this comes naturally because, above all, I learned in college that the questions are more important than the answers. I was so fortunate to have so many wonderful professors and fellow students who forced me to confront so many important questions.

Some examples:

1. What is justice? This was posed to me in a political philosophy course as we read Plato's Republic and it has been the driving question for my career as I pursued "justice" for first-year students, and now more recently, transfer students.
2. Just what constitutes good government? This makes me ask just what are the new House members who took over the House of Representatives actually going to do for college students?
3. Why do people voluntarily enter into relationships or vote into power governments that ultimately deprive them of their freedom? This question was inspired by my reading in my first year of Erich Fromm's Escape From Freedom.
4. In my senior year I read Fromm's The Art of Loving, which initiated me into an adult journey of asking thoughtful and profound questions about the nature of love, how to identify, attain, give, receive it.

I could wax on indefinitely but won't.

How Might I/You Live Differently This Year?

1-11-11

I write this blog post during the calendar context of the first week of the new year. This gives me lots of opportunities to listen and observe people as they report their New Year's Resolutions. Had an acquaintance ask me the other day: "How do you want to live differently?" This was/is an important question. Have you posed that to anyone yet this year? Has anyone posed this to you? How about asking this one of our students?

This is not the same as "what is your New Year's Resolution"? No, this is about how you would like to "live".

In my own case, I had to really think about this.

And finally I responded that I would like to walk more and read more. The former is not because I don't get enough exercise. I do. As a 66 year old man I run two miles most days. In addition, on weekends I do a lot of walking, which is really hiking for I do this on a mountain top in western North Carolina on which perches Betsy Barefoot's and my home. And I would like to do even more of it. It feels so good to be out there in the beauty, almost in any kind of weather, and what a stimulus to good thinking and reflection.

And, as for reading, well, I already do a lot of that. But I would like to do more. And to do that would take doing less professional work at night and more pleasure reading.

Now if I could just ratchet those two things alone up, even moderately, I would be living differently. Quality of life is a matter of how we use our time, the choices we make. And improvement comes, usually, by degree(s) (=pun).

Now how can we apply this question to our students? This is not just a beginning of the year question. This should be an everyday question. An everyday opportunity to revisit our purposes and how we are living, or not living congruently.

I know how I want to live, and largely it is how I am living, although I would be pleased with myself if I could learn a few things that I am not already good at. Apply that to your students too.

And I am very clear how I don't want to live. The Transcendental essayist, Henry David Thoreau, said it best: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation". I believe that, particularly in our country now as the gross inequalities of our society grow larger seemingly by the day. I don't want to live feeling that way and am thankful I don't. Again, what about our students?

Tucson's Day of Infamy

1-12-11

Saturday, January 8 was and will be forever, Tucson's Day of Infamy. It is also America's day. The term "infamy" is most frequently associated with the attack on Pearl Harbor which brought the United States into World War II. Not analogous here—other than both are examples of sudden and violent attack, personal violence and killing.

Like any and all of our thoughtful citizens, I am sorry.

I am sorry for all the victims.

I am sorry for all the victim's families.

I am sorry for our democratic institutions.

I am sorry that our culture in all probability provided so many examples and stimuli for the deranged shooter of intemperate anger, irrationality, and disrespect substituting for an enlightened, rational, respecting, political process.

I am sorry for the fellow students of the shooter at Pima Community College

I am sorry for the leaders of Pima Community College, several of whom I know personally and one very closely.

I am sorry for the shooter's family.

I am sorry for the shooter.

I am sorry for all of us. We have all been attacked, again. The peace, tranquility, sense of security and inviolability of us all has been pierced and weakened.

There is a part of me that wants to just shrug this all off and say "What can we expect? We live in a crazy country that encourages many forms of violence, and worships the ethos, the mystique, of the law of the gun". I am in despair that nothing, no matter how many senseless slaughters, will change our country's love affair with guns and our unwillingness to rationally restrict their use to protect us all. We didn't after Columbine. We didn't after Virginia Tec. We won't after Tucson.

What are the implications of all this for higher education, to allow myself to think narrowly here for a moment?

Surely, we are going to be under much more pressure to police our students, scrutinize them more systematically, report aberrant behavior, and become a first line of defense for the protection of larger society. What are the societal institutions where we can most likely spot potential assassins who demographically are much more likely to be adolescents or young adults: prisons, high schools, colleges and universities, and the military. Wow. I never thought before about the commonalities of the members of that category.

Do we now need to add to our required curricula the subject of "self-defense"?

I predict the smaller, rural, especially private, colleges and universities in their marketing will be even more intentional about suggesting they are safer, more secure, and peaceful. Interesting to note that the three most recent mass shootings by college students have all been by students from larger, public, institutions.

And I predict families, and too students who don't think they are immortal, will be elevating personal safety as a factor in college choice.

In America, this can happen to any of us, anytime, anywhere. In this respect, higher education has potential lethal commonality. The outside world impinges on us all. There is no keeping it out.

Announcing Additional Bloggers

1/19/11

This is going to be one of my shortest ever blogs! Am writing this one to announce that the John N. Gardner blog was really designed to be the John N. Gardner Institute blog. To date, I have been the only contributor representing our Institute. But that is going to change.

It is most appropriate that other members of our talented and dedicated staff join me on this blog and I welcome them. So you will see some new by-lines coming soon. We will also feature some “guests” from outside our Institute staff proper.

If you, our reader(s) have anything you would like us to write about, please let us know (info@jngi.org)

If you are not familiar with the mission and activities of our Institute which hosts this blog, I invite you to check us out at www.jngi.org.

Stay tuned. And let us hear from YOU.

Thanks.

Thirtieth Anniversary Coming Up Soon: What's Your Big Idea?

1-18-11

Anyone can have a big idea. In our Institute, we have a saying: "If John can do it, anyone can." So here is the story of my biggest idea. I challenge you to top this in your career.

It was 1981 and I had just been promoted to full professor at the University of South Carolina. I was 36 and the youngest full professor at the University. It was now time to decide what I was going to do when I grew up. Problem: I was still the undecided student I was in college!

This was the same year I got the seven year itch. This was because I had been serving as the faculty director of the University 101 first-year seminar for seven years. I really loved the job. The course was having a tremendously positive impact on our students. Those first-year students who took the course, when compared to like qualified students who didn't take the course were more likely to: return as sophomores, graduate, seek assistance, join co-curricular organizations and activities, interact with faculty outside of class, attend plays, concerts and lectures, and engage in more responsible health related behaviors connected to sexual decision making. What more could I ask for?

Well, I did want more. I wanted to know more about what other colleges and universities were doing in such courses, many of them developed as replications of our University 101. I wanted to be able to interact with a national peer group of faculty like myself, who had gotten engaged beyond their disciplines in the broader work of what we now call "student success". How could I make these connections? How could I learn more from other such higher educators?

This was a problem, a challenge. But I knew they were out there. But there was no meeting to convene us. And there was no literature base. There was not yet an established field of study of "first-year experience". Now, of course, there are convenings. There is a literature base. This has become an established field of professional endeavor.

So what was I to do? Continue as first-year seminar director? Or move on to other challenges. Before making that decision, I decided to see what I could do to further develop myself professionally in this work of directing first-year seminars. How could I do this when there were no associations of peers, conferences, or literature? I decided to organize a conference.

What qualifications did I have as a professional conference planner? Absolutely none. But I didn't let that stop me. With the help of my competent and risk taking administrative assistant, Vicky Howell and a former student of mine, a hotel management major who was the sales manager of a local Holiday Inn, we set out to plan a national conference, the 30th anniversary of which we are celebrating in Atlanta on February 4-8, 2011, now known as "The Conference on The First-Year Experience."

This was one of those "bottled water" or "roller bag" moments. Haven't you ever asked yourself "Why didn't I think of that?" You think of something you need and that others need to and would probably support if somebody invented a useful response to that need. There was a need for convening higher educators who wanted to improve the success of new students. There was no such forum. Why hadn't anyone thought of this and then done it? I don't know.

So, I decided to organize such a forum. But this was to be of limited focus, confined to faculty, academic and student affairs administrators who wanted to either launch or improve existing first-year seminars. We called this by a name that was certainly not memorable: "A National Conference on the Freshman Seminar/Freshman Orientation Course Concept." So much for brevity in our marketing.

Remember: Our Impact Transcends our Own Country

1-18-11

In these past few weeks we have had another crazy episode in our country: the shooting rampage in Tucson. This has been followed by a political stunt in our lower chamber, the House of Representatives, an attempt to roll back a modest step taken by our great democracy, to join other developed nations in one step further to universal health care. We have also just celebrated the birthday of an American who inspired millions and millions of freedom and justice seeking people all over the globe: Dr. Martin Luther King. In this context, I must remind myself that much of the world still envies and admires us. And what we do in our higher education system matters beyond our own national campus boundaries.

I think about this as I fly for the first time, with my wife, to visit South Africa, a country that much more recently, and more rapidly than ours, has ended its former de jure segregated way of life, including segregated higher education.

Back in the 1980's around the time when I founded the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students and Transition, at the University of South Carolina, during the same period when much of the developed world was pressing South Africa to "divest" itself of apartheid, we began getting requests from South African higher educators who wanted to come to our international and domestic conferences on The First-Year Experience. They wanted to learn from our successes and failures, our trials and tribulations, at ending de jure and de facto segregation in higher education.

I am proud to say that my colleagues in our Center and I would not participate in any form of sanctions against South Africa, which so many of our fellow higher educators engaged in to pressure the South African government to end apartheid. Instead, we believed it would serve no good for South Africa or the rest of the world, to deny access to our fellow higher educators from South Africa, access to our conferences, campuses, and other forms of collaboration. I am glad that I made that decision for my own small sphere of influence.

As a result, we had many South Africans come to First-Year Experience conferences. And we had some come visit us on study leaves and sabbaticals. I remember even committing an international breach of etiquette, a falsehood, in the name of this greater good of promoting international cooperation to help those students who had been disadvantaged by apartheid.

The year was 1986. I had organized, with the help of my USC colleague, Stuart Hunter, our first International Conference on the First-Year Experience. We were hosting this in the UK at Newcastle Upon Tyne Polytechnic. The City was gracious to offer our conference what they called a "Lord Mayor's civic reception". Before the event I was briefed by the Lord Mayor's protocol officer and was asked a few questions including "Are there any delegates from South Africa in attendance sir? If so, they may not enter the reception in the Lord Mayor's presence and hospitality?" I had only a flash of a second to decide, and I decided that the greater good demanded that I lie. And so I denied that we had any South Africans in attendance. But we did. And they attended this lovely event with the rest of us. That was as it should have been. So much has happened since in that formerly totally segregated country.

And I look forward to finally seeing the results of this process firsthand for myself. In some ways, we showed the way. But, as the MLK celebration reminded me this year, we still have a long way to go. I hope I will find some answers in South Africa as to how we can further that journey together.

Let's Hear It for South Africa

1-27-11

Ask an academic a simple question—chances are you won't get a simple answer. The blog is not a medium for a true academic. I like to think I am a true academic. I prefer to offer thorough and thoughtful answers. But in the blog medium you have to get right to it, and right out of it.

I write this at a time in point when I have been visiting South Africa for the first time, and have been in country for only six days. Some of my correspondents have asked me "how's it going?" And a number of my hosts have asked me "And what do you think of South Africa?"

It is impossible to do justice do this large, complex, ancient, challenging and inspiring culture in one short blog. But let me offer a few very preliminary observations:

1. Yes, South Africa is truly a beautiful country; it lives up to its billing.
2. And, yes, sports here are very important, as much as if not more than in my own country. They are particularly important as a means of national identity and unification.
3. And, yes, this is a country that is plagued by crime. But so is my own country. And statistically I am safer here than back home because proportionately fewer South Africans have guns.
4. This country has eleven official languages. In this regard, we have an advantage in the US.
5. Both our countries have greatly widened access to higher education by admitting large numbers and types of students to tertiary education for whom such providing institutions were not designed in the first place.
6. It is very important when you visit a country for the first time that you set aside to the extent possible all the assumptions (advance prejudices) you entered the country with and decide after you have actually encountered the new and unfamiliar culture.
7. There is an energy and "hustle" of the people that a visitor from the American south might not have expected from a people that have similarly experienced centuries of discrimination, racial prejudice and the domination of a majority population by an elite minority imposed by former colonial powers.
8. The country seems focused on promoting tourism. Everyone in the service industry is incredibly polite and aspires to deliver a higher standard of service than I would expect in American cities.
9. It is still possible to engage in air travel and find helpful personnel in strange airports who actually go out of their way to help new visitors to the country. US airport executives ought to visit the gateway airport in Johannesburg.
10. But South Africa has raised its proportion of underrepresented students in a much more compressed time period than we have. In like manner it has ended de jure segregation much more rapidly than we did.
11. I hear far more references in South Africa to the need to continue, expand, attain the aspiration of social justice for all than I do currently in the US. My visit here reinforces my sense that in the US the civil rights movement is truly stalled. Here it is not.
12. In both countries universities are principal agents of social, economic and political transformation. As a societal institution here the university strikes me as being more intentionally supportive of social change and support of democracy.
13. If ever there was a country that needed American style community colleges to promote economic development and alternative post secondary opportunities, it is South Africa.
14. The diversity of the people is complex, inspiring, and stunningly beautiful.

I am not here on retainer from the South African Department of Tourism.

Constantly Reassessing Individual Purpose

1-31-11

Any of us who have ever worked with college and university students know that one of the most important things we have to help challenge and support students in is their development of a sense of purpose. Of course, this doesn't apply just to students. It also applies to us. What is/are our purposes? What drives us? What do we live for? What do we work for?

I find myself constantly asking this, or reasking this with respect to my own work. I am one of the fortunate ones in our society, largely due to my age, in that I don't have to work, that is I don't have to work to earn money. I could be fully retired and live comfortably. So why do I keep working?

Well, because like other people, I like to do what I am good at, what I know, what gives me satisfaction, fulfillment, gratification and so on. I also work because there is really nothing else right now I would enjoy doing for a significant amount of my waking hours. In addition to my professional work I do have other interests: hiking, running, enjoying the dramatic and musical arts, friendships, and especially my precious time with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and our respective families.

But about a purpose for my work. Even though it, the work, has had a fairly constant purpose now since about 1974 when I first became Director of the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina, I find that I occasionally refine my mental interior language of how I define my purpose. This has happened again this past week during my visit to South Africa.

One can't look around him/herself thoughtfully in the US and not be struck by the dramatic differences in wealth of our fellow citizens. And we should be aware that one of the products of our society these days is the output of proportionately more poor, sick people, especially children, and a shrinking middle class. And an American such as myself can't spend any time in South Africa and realize that they too can be described as characterized by great differences in wealth, the differences between the haves and the have nots. But unlike us, they are gradually growing their middle class. May that trend continue.

As I was leaving South Africa today, the lead headline above the fold in the International Herald Tribune was "The Super-Rich Pull Even Farther Ahead". The article continued to describe a cross cultural phenomenon, namely, the creation since 1980 of "an international economic elite whose globetrotting members have largely pulled away from their counterparts." Now we are not talking here about just Americans. This is an international trend manifested in Canada, the UK, Scandinavia, Germany and most impressively in developing countries like India and China.

But, as the Tribune reported: "The trend is particularly stark in the US where from 1980 to 2005 more than 80% of the total increase in income went to the top 1 percent of the population. The gap there between the superrich and everybody else is now greater than at any time since before the Depression of the 1930's."

And what does this have with my sense of purpose? This helps me redefine my purpose. I view this extraordinary growth in inequality in my country as a great injustice, a threat to our democracy, a blunting of our world admired civil rights movement. I have long defined my work as an effort to help more Americans join the great American middle class. I still work for that. But I have to look beyond that because so many of our social, economic, governmental policies are making it much harder to grow the middle class. I conclude that I am morally offended by this trend and that my purpose has to be to help my higher education system close this shockingly unfair gap between the super-rich and everyone else. I think we all need to continually redefine our purpose(s).

What If?

2-2-11

I am just back with my wife from a business trip to South Africa. And I am finding the most difficult part of my reorientation is that I have left one country, not my own, and returned to another, my own, and find the one I left appears to be more publicly committed to social justice and equality of opportunity than the one I returned to. This is very painful for me. So I find myself engaging in a universal human mental pastime: "What if?"

Simultaneous with my return has been the upheaval in Tunisia followed by the even more portentous protests in Egypt. There is much commentary on the uses of social media to move people to actions for political purposes. We are also aware that in the aftermath of social media being used in the Iranian protests of last year, that government has been using the electronic trails of such media to track down, arrest, and who knows do what to the users.

But I can't help but wondering: what if American college students used social media not for the original purpose that the founder of Face Book ostensibly described that purpose (to help college students get hooked up together) but instead to organize themselves for political action to challenge the many things that aren't going well for college students these days, such as:

1. Federal financial aid policy not keeping up with real costs for higher education
2. Cuts in state appropriations for public higher education and state subsidies in the form of tuition grants
3. Corporations sitting on the largest cache of cash in their history instead of using it to create jobs for new college graduates
4. Efforts by Republican politicians to roll back Obamacare, which college students should regard as one further step towards universal health care, an ultimate single payer system, the only thing that will save many future college graduates from being bankrupted by health care cost

I could go on, but won't. What if we could produce another generation of activist students?

Thirty Years and Going Strong

2-8-11

I write this as I fly to my first ever February vacation, with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, destination: Australia and New Zealand. Betsy and I have just attended the 30th annual Conference on The First-Year Experience organized by the University of South Carolina. This event drew approximately 1600 higher educators from around the globe. This meeting is the latest in a series which I founded, with my colleagues at USC, in 1982.

I will focus in the brief posting on some general observations and conclusions drawn by me:

1. Approximately half the attendees were what we call "first-timers". I conclude from this that both the series and the movement continue to welcome, attract, and assimilate many new members and practitioners. Naturally, I find this very gratifying and confident about the future of the movement which I have helped found.
2. This is one of the few meetings I attend where there are an abundance of young faculty and administrators and staff, who mix very well with more seasoned and therefore older higher educators. I found this extremely valuable to me this year. It has been a long time since I did not have power. And since I was very low in a collegiate organizational hierarchy. It was useful for me to hear how the younger, more junior colleagues view and feel the brunt of many policy decisions made by us older and supposedly wiser hands. It would appear that they think we do some very stupid things! The kind of candor expressed at this meeting is different from many back home work settings where those less powerful would be willing to engage in the kind of conversation I was party to in this setting. These conversations though are exactly the kind that senior folks need to expose themselves to however that might be possible.
3. I was struck by how empowered these younger educators seemed to feel to take steps to improve student performance, regardless of available resources or their individual positions in the institutional hierarchy. There was a sense of optimism that these educators really could improve student success and I found this very inspirational.
4. The demographics of this meeting, those gathered who have in common their commitment to nurturing new students, were strikingly and overwhelmingly female. Where are the male educators? What are their values? What are their rewards? What are their purposes?
5. Compared to the late 80's, early 90's, there are it struck me that there are far fewer really senior educators participating in this conversation, e.g. presidents, chief academic officers. What might explain this? Perhaps it is that they are already aboard. They get it. They know the importance of paying attention to new students and they have delegated the care and feeding of these students to their subordinates. This audience looked very different to me from those I see attending the annual meetings of the regional accreditors, which are over represented by the powerful of the academy. For me, this is further confirmation of my belief that the first-year improvement movement needs to be better connected to the work of the regional accreditors. That is what gets the attention of senior campus leaders. And therefore, that is what gets the resources.
6. There was surprisingly (to me anyway) little talk in the sessions about the impact of "the cuts". Instead, it was just taken as a given and so what I saw was the result of increased productivity very much in keeping with recent press reports of another quarter just completed of significant rises in the productivity of American workers. I heard many many anecdotal reports of increased teaching, counseling, advising loads, and of filling the gaps led by formerly but no longer existent programs and staff.
7. And finally, this movement has really taken on the dominant values of the society: it is now totally integrated with shameless commerce, for profit companies selling products and services to increase student success (or so it is touted anyway). In like manner, the mantra of the movement is overwhelmingly

about “retention”, a business and revenue model. In many of the sessions, it seemed to matter little what students were learning as long as they were staying and being “retained”. That troubles me profoundly. Higher education for what?

So, in conclusion, what is the purpose of all this energy to improve the first year. Yes, it is still about the students. About helping, supporting, challenging, changing them. But it is also about the quintessential American obsession of making money. Perhaps the few Canadian educators there from the Province of Ontario say it best. They have their own conceptual version of the American concept of “FTE”, full-time equivalent: “BIU”= “Basic Income Unit”. I left the meeting gratified and inspired, thankful, but wondering if this was the purpose I had been working for over these last four decades...?

Reporting From Down Under

2-11-11

Earlier this week I was at the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience where I had told people in several large groups I was speaking to that I was leaving right after the conference for Australia and New Zealand, with my wife, on vacation. So it surprised me and thus influenced me when probably a half a dozen or so people said to me that they wanted me to “blog from Australia”.

I was surprised for several reasons: 1) I really don't have any idea who is reading this blog – or if it has any significant readership at all; 2) my philosophy underlying this blog is that it is a form of professional commentary and series of observations; 3) and therefore people would not have the slightest interest in my thinking while I was on vacation.

But once I learned that I had some who would be interested it changed somewhat how I knew I would approach my vacation and my use of my powers of observation during this period. I began to think of myself as a “reporter” looking for things to report on.

What if we had this attitude towards our commerce across campus? As we walked about in our ordinary course of movement about the campus, what if we kept our eyes open for remarkable things to write about in a form of reportage?

I have known the power of this for a long time. My first mentor at the University of South Carolina, President Thomas F. Jones, was fond of telling audiences which often contained me, that the student riot of May 1970 had a great impact on him when the students attempted to occupy his building and burn it down. He would recommend to all of us that “you really should observe student behaviors and see what they tell you.....” In this particular case the students' collective behavior told him that they were angry and he realized they hadn't entered the University that way and that we therefore must have done something to them to evoke such anger. His insight led him to form a committee to create the University 101 course to teach the students to love the University in order to prevent future riots. He ultimately gave me my big career break and appointed me as course director. In turn, I ultimately founded the Freshman Year Experience conference series and The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. This president's observation of student behavior really led to something!

So as I have been walking the streets of Sydney, these are some of my observations:

1. There is no better way to put your own country in perspective than to walk the streets of another country.
2. And that is the value of study abroad, student exchange, etc, for our students as we prepare them for adult lives in a global society.
3. Sydney is the New York of Australia, a city of more than four million, the country's largest, and the center of its commerce.
4. But compared to New York City, Sydney is unbelievably quiet—absolutely no horns. What does this tell me about these people as compared to ours?
5. And in two days of wandering the streets freely I have not seen a single police officer, security person of any kind. That would be inconceivable in any US city.

Let's Run the Campus Like the New Zealanders Run Their Customs

2-14-11

Yesterday I arrived, with my wife, for the first time in New Zealand, entering at Queenstown, the adventure tourism capitol of the world, where I encountered the most thorough Customs review I have encountered anywhere in the world. The New Zealanders are serious about protecting their beautiful country from 2 things: 1) people that would overstay their welcome and thus increase the country's population and add more obligations for the taxpayer; and 2) natural, biological, infestations that could be carried in on clothing, in food, etc and wreak havoc on the landscape and agricultural resources of the nation. I answered a question honestly on the Customs arrival form that yes, I was bringing in to the country a pair of hiking boots. They were definitely removed and inspected. And these people have good reason to want to limit excess immigration: this is an incredibly desirable place to live and it could soon be overwhelmed by others fleeing the world's craziness (like we have in the US). Who wouldn't want to live in a country with universal health care, relatively low crime, no great disparities in income and wealth, a wonderful climate, a passion for peace and preserving their environment, and no guns in every house!

But what really captured my attention when I entered the country was that we had to prove (by some verifiable means upon entry) that we had a specific plan for leaving the country—e.g. like a receipt for purchased airline reservations out of the country. And suddenly it hit me: hey, they aren't trying to retain me. They really are serious about wanting me to leave! Now this got me thinking (a dangerous thing for those who work with me)...

So what if we ran the campus like the New Zealanders run their Customs' operation: demanding that every student had a plan for exit? What if we had policies and practices insuring that students did leave, after they accomplished their purposes and ours for them, just like New Zealand has a policy that insures that Betsy Barefoot and I leave after we attain our purposes for coming here (a great vacation that enhances our learning too!).

What if we told the students, yes, this is a beautiful place. You are going to have the time of your life. We are going to stimulate you in many ways you can't even yet imagine. We are going to transform you, give you a new sense of purpose and the mental tools to live a much richer life. You will love this place so much you will never want to leave. But you must. We are going to be the sanest place you ever visited. You will be safer here than any place you have lived because there are no guns on campus. And every student will have a special student health insurance policy that will protect you from any medical challenges during college. What if as the students entered we succeeded in dramatically raising their expectations for how they would perform and what they would experience subsequently?

But no, that is not what we do. Instead of trying to get them to leave the best living experience of their lives, all we can think about is "retaining" them. It doesn't matter how long they stay. Just as long as they pay (note the rhyme). Our only purpose for them is what they do for us: pay us. Just as long as they comprise those FTE's, we aim to please (note the rhyme again).

You say Gardner jests. No, he once had a wife who told him repeatedly not to attempt to tell jokes because they failed miserably. Actually, I am being very serious. I think that if we could somehow be more deliberate in our transformative roles as higher educators, we could create campus experiences where students would never want to leave—but we would make them do so. However, as our student performance rates suggest, and our obsession on retaining students as opposed to providing them with high impact learning experiences, this is not what we do.

Looking at the Campus Through the Lens of the Haves vs. the Have Nots

2-16-11

The combination of my blogging, personal process of introspection, and recent international travel, has made me realize at a higher level of deliberateness, that I am an academic tourist. No matter what I do, or where I am, I am an academic. So in my role as an itinerant blogger tourist, I am constantly thinking about what I can report on—report especially to my own state of intellectual awareness, and then perhaps to my readers.

So I have realized that one of the most common ways I see the world is through the prism of the haves vs the have nots. I have been in four countries since January 20, and as of February 13 when I write this posting: South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and, of course, my own beloved country, which I once served in the Armed Forces, and which I now serve as a higher educator.

In South Africa, it was very easy to observe the haves vs the have nots. The latter were everywhere. Until the early 1990's this country had a minority white government running a country that is 80% "African", and much of it very, very poor. I saw the differences of the haves vs the have nots played out on a major university campus: those who were hungry; those who were not. Those who had access to technology prior to coming to university; those who had not. Those who had enough clothing for university life and those who did not. Those who were from rural schools which probably didn't have a library (how do you prepare students to function in a global society without a library?) Yes, there were enormous differences. But at least, it was public policy numero uno of the government to pursue social justice, to reduce these vast disparities, and to hold all government agencies, like public universities, accountable for how they performed vis a vis this objective. And then I returned to the United States.

In the US we also have vast differences between the haves vs the have nots. One out of five of our children live in poverty. The middle class is shrinking. We are deliberately reducing the social safety net. The performance of our higher education system, once the world's top performer now lags significantly behind in access, retention, and graduation rates. We are deliberately striving to weaken or even eliminate labor unions, one of the few societal structures trying to expand the middle class. We recently attempted to expand access to health care but now are witnessing a huge effort to roll this back. We have a "Supreme Court" that recently expanded civil and legal rights to corporations to equate them with individual citizen rights. This has led to vast increases in corporation expenditures to, literally, buy elections. Governmental policies, particularly in taxation, but also in education, environmental regulation, health care, banking and securities regulation, overwhelming favors the rich and the powerful. The country's dominant value system now seems to reflect the beliefs of the minority party and the majority party seems to be racing the minority party to see who can cut the have nots the most. One of our state's governors (Texas) has even proposed that the entire state support for the federal Medicaid program be cut, eliminating three million citizens from health insurance (the same governor who suggested his state should consider seceding from the Union). I could go on, but won't.

And then there are Australia and New Zealand. Here the differences between have's and have nots are much less perceptible. And that's because they are simply much less. This is due to many factors, both historical and political, such as: tax policies, and a more generous social safety net.

All this turns me, as always, to our campuses. How do the differences there between the haves vs the have nots, play out? I look at this in two basic ways: the student culture and that of the institution's sub units, policies and practices. Any campus I happen to be on I can see the differences between the haves and the have nots—both in the students, and in the institutional units. In terms of the latter, some units, programs, are more favored than others (some much more!). Some get more resources, some less. Some are more favored in institutional priorities (e.g. the strategic plan), others less.

But it is the students I am particularly interested in. A few examples to illustrate this lens of the haves vs the have nots:

1. What about the disparity between those who live on campus (because they can afford to) and those who do not? Examine their levels of engagement and particularly their differential graduation rates.
2. What about the attention and commitment of resources they receive as a function of academic standing or category? For example: undecided majors vs decided majors. First-year students vs upper class students? Transfer students vs "native" students? "Student" athletes vs non-athletes? "Greek" affiliated students vs non affiliated students? "Merit" aid recipients vs strictly Federal aid recipients? Minority students vs majority students? I could go on but won't.

So, what would it take to move your campus to one that succeeds in reducing the differences between the haves vs the have nots? I learned in my own outstanding liberal arts education that the questions are sometimes more important than the answers. I urge you to try to more consciously see your own campus through this lens of the haves vs the have nots.

I am urging this because I am profoundly concerned about the future of our democracy which at present is intentionally increasing the separation between, the rights and privileges of, haves vs the have not. And such differences are not good for any democracy. And, if extended to even greater extremes, they may well threaten our democracy. All we have to do is to look at the levels of instability where there exist the greatest such differences: Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Palestine, etc. The college experience is fundamentally about producing informed citizens to enhance and sustain the democracy. Given our current magnitude of differences, I would say we are in trouble. My recent foreign travel really brings this home to me.

Silence

2-18-11

I did a blog posting not too long ago reflecting on what students might do when they could find what I called “privacy” by which I meant private space, both mental and spatial, which also implied their getting unconnected for a while. This is a blog about something related, but distinct, silence.

This blog is inspired by a boat cruise my wife and I took yesterday on one of the most spectacular waterways of the world, Doubtful Sound (which is really, technically, a fiord) in New Zealand. We had been out on this boat for about two hours when the pilot and guide, came on the PA and announced that he was shutting down the engine and that he wanted us all to be “silent” for few moments, “to just see what you can hear—the sounds of the birds, the water, all things natural”. It wasn’t too long before this got me to thinking...

First of all, I couldn’t remember ever being on a tour of any kind in the States where the guide requested his/her charges to simply be silent (very hard for connected Americans to do) and listen.

Then it reminded me of my son, Jonathan, coming home at about age 16 from the first “Outward Bound” trip I sent him on. For you higher education types “Outward Bound” needs to be distinguished from the highly regarded educational intervention for college bound high school youngsters, “Upward Bound”.

Instead, Outward Bound, headquartered in the US in Swannanoa, North Carolina, about 40 miles from where I live in Brevard, North Carolina, is a provider of wilderness hiking/adventure/growth experiences. The first time my son experienced an Outward Bound trip, it was to the Everglades in Florida. And when he returned the first of many things he reported to me was his experience of -----silence.

He told me that step one on the trip was for the teenagers to give up all their electronic gadgets that keep them connected and stimulated. And then each was taken and left at a spot in the wilds to be completely alone for 24 hours and tasked to listen and think, and take notes in a provided notepad for this purpose. He described this as a very powerful experience.

When do we call for “a moment of silence”? Most commonly it is in association with some grave event, some loss—personal or communal, and for many this event is characterized by prayer. Usually these “moments” are just that, a minute or two. The implicit point conveyed here is that this moment of silence isn’t anything we would want to continue for too long. It would interfere with something Americans prize: productivity.

The point of my blog is to suggest you to think about interjecting some silence into your students’ lives. What if you began, and/or ended a meeting, a class period, with a request that students stop doing every else, disconnect, and simply be silent. Would this help them make the transition to the start of your class? If you did this at the end of the class, would it help them pull together and make some decisions about what they had learned, the value of this class period? Would it help them make the transition to the next period of the day in a more thoughtful, intentional manner? I don’t know. But I think so.

Even more broadly, what if you just built in a few “silence breaks” into your day? When I get back from New Zealand, I am going to give that a try.

“Well, I have never thought about that before....”

2-22-11

I have given a great deal of thought to how it is that men and women students experience higher education differently. And there is a great deal of empirical data to support the conclusion that the experience varies considerably by gender. But in talking about this especially with students, but also educators themselves, I have never given them a discussion prompt where I asked them to try to put themselves into the space of a person of the opposite gender and conjure up the details of what that other experience might be like.

This past week while hiking, walking, and running extensively the beautiful trails for such in New Zealand I kept seeing time and time again relatively young women hiking, walking, running, unaccompanied. And, yes, I saw men doing this too. And, of course, I saw couples of both genders. But what struck me finally after noting it more times than I could count where all the women engaging in these pastimes alone. Naturally, I was observing this through the lens of my US citizen and resident acculturated ideas. I live in a hikers paradise, outside Asheville, North Carolina, in Brevard. And Brevard is surrounded by thousands of acres of the magnificent Pisgah National Forest. And I never see women in there walking, hiking, running alone. And with the exception of some big city well populated and policed parks, and the same for college campuses, I just don't see this either.

So I finally asked thirtyish New Zealand woman who had previously told me she was a cyclist about my observation of seeing so many women enjoying the outdoors as a solitary pursuit. And I asked her specifically if she felt safe. Her response: “Well, I have never really thought about that... ”

So she did think about it and upon reflection she informed me she had never felt unsafe and had never even considered “safety” (from crime) as a potential factor to influence her decisions about what she did outside, where, and whether or not she wished to be accompanied.

For some reason, this exchange brought home to me as much as anything I have observed in New Zealand, the differences between life there and in my own country. I know that as a man I constantly consider personal safety when making decisions. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I, and especially US women, could experience the freedom that these New Zealand women (and men) realize daily?

And what would it take to accomplish that? Oh, nothing short of eliminating our huge differences in wealth and opportunity, improving our educational system, drastically curtailing our access to guns, and more.

I look forward to returning to my home in the States but I know I will never live to see this kind of personal freedom in the US enjoyed by New Zealanders.

Some Departing Thoughts upon Leaving Paradise

2-20-11

I have just spent with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, about ten days in a vacation paradise, New Zealand. And I offer below some departing observations, most of which in some way are relevant to my work as a higher education leader:

1. Winter and summer are reversed in New Zealand from our seasonal cycle in the US. So universities begin their annual year in February, which is essentially near the end of the New Zealand summer.
2. Universities here refer to entering first-year students as "freshers". This describes particularly the period before classes begin and during which these new students experience orientation.
3. Orientation is provided by the "Students Unions" which are powerful, well funded associations representing students. They own property and provide many activities for new students including parties and other functions that provide alcoholic beverages for these students (the drinking age is lower than in the US). And from my reading of press descriptions of "freshers' week", binge drinking is very prevalent.
4. Out in the countryside, there are many signs to me that I am not in the US, other than the topography.
5. For one thing, in ten days in this country, I did not see one mobile home (trailer).
6. And there are so few churches in rural areas that when you come into a town there will be a road sign directing you to "Churches".
7. I saw no evidences of extreme poverty, people living in hovels like I can easily see in my own country. There just aren't the vast differences in wealth.
8. Whenever I asked a New Zealander what he/she "did" in life, instead of telling me one's occupation (as an American would), I was told what this person did outdoors for recreation. No wonder, as individuals and collectively through their government, they zealously protect their natural environment.
9. Whenever I was in a restaurant in which there might be other Americans and where I could unavoidably catch the drift of their conversations, those conversations inevitably had some connection to money—how they earned it, spent it, what things cost, etc.
10. I asked my wife if she thought there was any correlation between the relative absence of churches and mobile homes, and the lack of disparities between the haves and the have nots. Her response: "That's a very complex question".

Whenever I taught the first-year seminar and would explain the outcomes of college and how college educated people are influenced in terms of how they think, I had in mind students, hopefully, having the opportunity to travel abroad, and to make their own observations and being able to generate their own hypotheses to explain the differences (and similarities) they might observe. This is one thing our work is all about. Too bad more of our elected leaders haven't had such experiences. If they had, would they be whacking the social safety net as they are?

My Luckiest Day

2-23-11

I have a number of thought lines that lead into where I am going with the blog which may well turn into a Joycean stream of consciousness piece.

I have had a lot of lucky days in my life. I like to think of myself as a person who has led a life of taking initiative, making my own opportunities, and so on. But, no question, I have had a lot of lucky breaks. And yesterday, well, it may have been the biggest one of all.

Yesterday, February 22, 2011, my wife Betsy Barefoot and I left Christ Church New Zealand, where we had spent the last two days of our New Zealand 10 day vacation, in this wonderful, very British form of New Zealand small city. Our flight departed Christ Church at 9.20AM. And we had spent the night before on the very top floor—floor # 13 now that I think about it—which you almost never see in an American hotel, in a hotel in the center of this lovely city. Three hours and thirty one minutes after we pushed back from the gate, the city experienced a devastating earthquake. As I write a day later the death toll is still unknown. The hotel we stayed at is structurally unsafe to enter. The one across the street from it is rubble. The archetypal symbol of Christ Church, the Anglican Cathedral, which we admiringly visited the day before, is in ruins. The day before had been absolutely beautiful, sunny, clear, not a cloud in the sky, in the low 80's, with everyone it seemed out and about enjoying the wonderful day. What a difference a day makes.

This morning when I boarded a flight in Sydney Australia to return to the US, I realized I had become separated from a prize gentleman's hat. I am a collector of such hats. I didn't start wearing hats until I was forty, but now they are one of my signature sartorial characteristics. I was sick about my loss, for just a few seconds. This was a hat I purchased in Ireland about five years ago and it had served me well and made me look more stylish, masculine, and debonair than I possibly could without it. But I remember one of the many phrases from my first mentor at the University of South Carolina, the late Thomas F. Jones, the man who gave me one of my biggest of all time professional breaks, inviting me to get involved in the University 101 experiment and ultimately picking me as its first permanent director, as his third choice—what was Tom's saying: "No sense crying about anything that can be replaced by money". And I thought about all those dear souls whom Betsy and I had seen just the day before in Christ Church, a city which we knew we wanted to return to, who had just lost so much that could not be replaced by money.

I have preached to my students for years the importance of doing your best to control the things in life that you can control: what time you get up; whether you have breakfast; what you eat; how much you exercise; with whom you associate; wearing a seat belt; not drinking and driving; not abusing the temple of your body with tobacco and other drugs, etc. And I really do try to practice what I preach: exercising tremendous self discipline and control. But I have also always been an existentialist in terms of how I think about life's most important outcomes. I discovered existentialism like most of the rest of my important ideas, in college. The existentialist view is that the universe is indifferent, random, often cruel, that one's fate is often the result of chance occurrences, like yesterday's earthquake. I must really be lucky. I am really lucky.

Last night my wife and I at a dinner to celebrate our lives, and mourn the loss of the lives in a newly discovered special city for us, each made a list for the other of our luckiest breaks. Mine included, but were not limited to:

- Winning the adoption lottery by being selected by two adults who gave me a childhood of privilege and total lack of material need
- Choosing Marietta College which facilitated such incredible intellectual liberation for me; I chose it on a whim
- Having a sophomore student come up to me one day after class and explain to me that I was failing this course we were in together because I was not taking any lecture notes. He showed me how. And my grades went from failing everything to becoming a very successful student.

- Having a draft board in a wealthy community where there weren't enough people to draft and hence being drafted myself
- That led me to volunteer for the Air Force
- Having some senior NCO in the Lackland Air Force Base Personnel Office take some interest in me and offer me a slot in a psychiatric hospital unit, not as a patient but as a social worker
- That got me sent to South Carolina
- Having a squadron commander that took the time and interest to read my record carefully and discover that I was well educated and hence led him to ordering me to become an adjunct college teacher—no one had ever before suggested to me I had an obligation to perform "service"
- Having a wonderful teaching experience in my first class which led me to want to make a life of this profession where you can earn a legal living of socially redeeming value by doing the four things I live doing the most: talking, reading, writing, and helping people.
- And then being offered a full-time teaching job at the University of South Carolina, after my honorable discharge from the military
- And then having my University President invite me to join him in this grand educational experiment called University 101
- And then being asked to become Director, because the first two choices turned the job down
- And then years later meeting Betsy Barefoot at the University of South Carolina
- And having a dear colleague, Russ Edgerton, then of The Pew Charitable Trusts, offer Betsy and me our first grant to do totally new work to improve the first year in higher education.

Oh yes, I've had a lot of lucky breaks. But yesterday's was the biggest one of all. Because Betsy and I are still alive to live life to the fullest and to continue our unfinished professional agenda.

You could convert this to a useful introspective exercise, for yourself, for your students: what have been your lucky breaks? Versus what have you been the prime mover to make happen, which also turned out very well. What has been the balance of all this for you.

Final Notes on Comparing Three Countries

2-28-11

I am just finishing my first ever February vacation. Never took a vacation in February before because either: 1) I was teaching and it was the middle of the semester; or 2) I just never made the effort to plan one; or 3) never thought about it because it was "winter" in the part of the world where I reside.

But I am just finishing a two week vacation with my wife Betsy Barefoot, to Australia and New Zealand, where neither of us had been before. And it has made us a believer in the February vacation.

I know, the December holiday period was just two months ago. But that's in a cold time of year for us. And we have a house full of children and grandchildren whom we love to have come visit it, but it certainly isn't any vacation.

There have been many levels of enjoyment for me of this vacation, but one I want to elaborate on here is that it has been kind of an experiential learning seminar. It has shown me time and again the value of the fine college education I received, because it was that education which taught me how to see what I could see, and how to understand, appreciate, celebrate, and embrace cultural and historical differences.

So, some final observations on the three countries I have been in in the last two weeks: the US, Australia, and New Zealand:

1. Those folks outside the US really do have a different sense of time than we "Yanks" do. They really are "laid back". They deserve that reputation. For most people, there just isn't any hurry. You see this in so many contexts: waiting for a bellman to retrieve your luggage; waiting for an order to be taken or the food prepared and served; the boarding process on airplanes which is not done by zone or priority and which totally lacks the American characteristic "rush rush". I could cite many other examples.
2. I was surprised to see so many educated, professional looking young (under 35) either pregnant or pushing babies around in strollers. Work and making money is obviously not the national obsession in these places, nor is it the same level of financial investment due to universal health care and generous social subsidies for new mothers (and fathers) and infants.
3. The number of responses New Zealand police have had to make in the past decade to incidents involving firearms, while minuscule in comparison to their peers in the US, nevertheless, has doubled. They attribute this entirely to the increase in proliferation of unlawful firearms. In our country, where over 100,000 Americans have died by gunfire since 1965 and where there are almost as many guns as there are people (300 million vs 340 million), guns are wreaking far more havoc but are held in sacred regard by members of all political groups.
4. My wife and I had rental cars in two countries for nine days, and only had one person blow a horn at us during that whole period. I am very in touch with just how much more aggressive we Americans are.
5. I encountered a number of citizens in both the countries we visited who were obviously members of what we would call in the States: working class. But in all of those, I did not detect any lack of subject verb agreement. If listening to people talk is a performance indicator of quality of education, these two countries are doing something we aren't.
6. Politics and sports are the national past times in all three countries. But our politics are far more divisive and nasty. There is no "birther" movement in Australia or New Zealand. And no one is criticizing the party of the highest elected leader because that leader's spouse recently made comments endorsing the health merits of breast feeding.

So, I find myself wondering, what would my students note of interest in these three places? How does foreign travel influence their understanding of their own country, other countries, and of their ultimate life choices?

I am now returning to the United States with even more pronounced reservations about the kind of society we

have created for ourselves. But this is where my friends and family are, the basis of my professional work, my home, the familiar, what I still want most to invest in to help fulfill its potential for a stronger democracy and more humane way of life for all our citizens.

Readjusting to My Country: It' Been an Adjustment

3-14-11

When I last blogged it was from overseas in Australia and New Zealand. As a footnote to a recent blog in which I compared how petty was my loss of favorite gentleman's hat compared to the terrible losses of the wonderful people of Christ Church where we had visited and left three hours before the earthquake: Delta Airlines found my hat and has sent it back to me. How I wish New Zealanders lives could be put back together so easily. I returned on the 23rd and have found my readjustment a challenge. And not because of jet lag which I didn't experience at all. But because of all the stimuli which have jarred my sensibilities upon return, and how contrasting they are to what I experienced in the two English speaking countries I visited, which like ours, are former British colonies.

So now that I am back, I am reacclimating to automobile drivers blowing their horns. And to seeing lots of armed police officers. And to living in a very dangerous country. And to having to hassle with health insurers who are doing everything they can not to pay claims---human organizations which exist to promote a particular human good, profits for investors and high salaries for senior executives, and whose business is only incidentally health insurance for US citizens.

And readjusting to a national legislature which is less homogenous every year and hence finds it harder and harder to see the world the same way and find common ground.

And to a highly argumentative, adversarial political culture, where things have degenerated almost to an unprecedented state of affairs in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio. I am glad my children are no longer small. How would I hold up our leaders to them as exemplars for civility.

And to Congressional hearings attacking an American minority (Muslim Americans) by asserting its threat to all things American, said hearings being chaired by a Representative which the The New York Times reported on 3-9-11 was a champion for the terrorist outlawed group, the Irish Republican Army in 1982 and who went so far as to condone collateral damage to civilians.

And to one state legislature (New Hampshire) introducing legislation to deny the franchise to college students while criticizing them for being "liberal" because "they vote their feelings and lack real life experience".

I am glad to be back, truly I am. I love my country. I love my freedom to think and write as I please. I love my occupation helping colleges and universities to help students. I love the small mountain town where I live. Of course, I love my family. I love the opportunities my free enterprise system gives me if only I have good ideas, initiative, and the ability to follow through. I love that I have the franchise. I am thankful for the strides we have made during my lifetime towards social justice for all.

But it is a bit jarring to reenter and become reintroduced to what is going on in America as we know it in 2011.

What Shall We Tell Them?

3-16-11

I have returned to the US and something remarkable has happened: the same people who brought us the political party and dominant national ethos which gave us the financial meltdown, the huge deficits, an unnecessary war, have miraculously persuaded many of my fellow citizens that the folks to blame for our economic woes are—stand by: public employees. You know, the \$50,000 dollar or year cops, firepersons, teachers, civil servants who have been living the high life as overpaid government workers. It is they who have caused our state fiscal crises, and not the economic recklessness of Wall Street which led to huge layoffs and declines in tax revenues. History is being rewritten. And the most unsuspecting villains of this piece—who would have ever thought it would come to this: the teachers. And not the well treated university types like me, no, the rank and file classroom teachers. I have returned to mass layoffs of teachers and threats to cut Head Start and other programs for pre-school children. Talk about class warfare? This is truly class warfare against the poor and less fortunate. But then, they can't hire lobbyists. As I once heard Vernon Jordan say in a speech in Columbia, S.C, when he was President of the Urban League: "If you ain't in the room, you ain't part of the action". And it is the public servants who aren't in the room. Even those in unions. They aren't allowed in anymore as we race to take away their rights of free speech and collective bargaining.

So, what are we going to tell our students?

For some decades now, public sector employment has become more attractive and compelling to many of our students. The reasons, of course, were multiple: an outlet for their idealism; an opportunity to be of service and to return the gift; greater employment security (or so they thought) in return for much lower wages; secure predictable benefits (or so they thought); the opportunity to retire at a younger age; and more.

We have been making all kinds of strides in enticing some of the best and the brightest into teaching. After 9/11 who had become our national heroes? Fire fighters and police officers. It wasn't the Wall Street bankers and brokers who rushed into the Twin Towers never to emerge again, trying in vain to rescue our innocent life threatened citizens. A decade later, one political party actually demanded a drastic reduction in the damage settlements to be awarded to those rescue workers who had acquired long term illnesses in that heroic rescue effort, a heatless attack against our heroes set back only by the crusade of a television commentator and talk comedy host.

Our students in the main think that college has something to do with getting a job, a better job, a well-paying job. So what are we going to tell them? Why would any thoughtful student now consider entering the career of teaching? With reductions in wages and retirement benefits. With a proposal to close half the schools in Detroit and to increase class size up to 50. Just who would want to teach in this context? Maybe we should just eliminate schools and send these urban kids straight to jail.

I am being serious: what are we going to tell our students? Should they pursue civil service occupations in spite of these dimmed prospects for a decent middle class living? Are the psychic rewards sufficient? What are their other options to be of service? How can we persuade the students to discount the criticism being heaped upon these occupations, the scapegoating? What else can we say other than: "Forgive them, for they know not what they think and say?"

Just Look Around

3-21-11

One of the best jobs in the world has to be just talking with students. For those of us so fortunate as to be working on college and university campuses, there are so many opportunities to talk with students. And there are so many things we could be talking to them about!

Are you talking to them about the perfect storm of natural and human made disasters that have converged in Japan? We could not find a more compelling example of the potential downside of technology. If this doesn't shake your faith in technology, what will it take?

Are you asking the students why they think the response so far of Americans to charities to aid the Japanese is so much lower than American giving responses to the earthquake victims in Hawaii just over a year ago?

Are you asking your students what they think of the spectacles in the three legislatures of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana where one political party is attempting to take away hard won rights of organized labor which have been evolving for over century in our country? Why should our students care about the affected workers rights in these three states?

Are you asking the students to reflect on the powerful illustrations of global interdependence we have seen since the earthquake in Japan disrupted the global supply chain?

Are you asking the students what they are thinking about the proposed programmatic cuts being focused upon my our Congressional representatives? What stake do our college students have in the programs being targeted for cuts, such as Head Start, Planned Parenthood and National Public Radio?

One of the most important things I learned in college was that the questions are often more important than the answers.

If the students aren't talking to and with you, who are they talking to? And who do you want them to be talking to? If they are not talking with you, there is a great chance they are going to finish college untouched by our process. What a waste that would be.

Learning to Be A Little Less American: Collaboration vs Competition

3-26-11

Recently I gave a talk at a convention in which I urged my patient and polite audience to try to be a little less American by reducing their culturally taught inclination and preference for competition—and instead, to practice more collaboration. In tight economic times, and in the new normal of scarcer resources, of all kinds, we simply don't have the luxury of competing in all the ways we have done so historically on our campuses. I went on to offer some suggestions for engaging in collaboration and I offer them here:

Let me share some strategies for collaboration:

1. **Has to emerge from your basic values. You have to have a philosophy.**
2. **Ideally, you should have a written philosophy statement. And you should share it**
3. **And your unit needs both a mission and philosophy statement, in which value of collaboration is made explicit in the latter**
4. **You need an advisory group of stakeholders.** But you must convene them, solicit their advice and take it, act on it. Just having this group and using it is a form of collaboration.
5. **Need to assess impact of your work and share it publicly**, particularly explaining what you did from what you learned and how other stakeholders helped increase your effectiveness. In this context you are reporting what it is that you did collaboratively that led to positive outcomes.
6. **Ask who else, what other unit/program has similar needs, student populations served?** How do we currently work together or not? How do we make similar or different use of institutional resources?
7. **What could we conceivably share, integrate?**
8. **What efficiencies could we accomplish?** Better to self initiate these than to have them imposed upon you!
9. **What am I doing that I don't really need to be doing?**
10. **What do I know that some other unit is probably doing better than I am and if I gave something up I could better concentrate on my core mission and improve my effectiveness at that?**
11. **Do I really need all the resources I have?** Are there some I could give back?
12. **Ask how can I help individual X or unit Y be more effective in their mission?** Serve yourself by serving others.
13. My own experience has taught me that **a focus on critical student transitions during the college years are an ideal focus for partnerships**: the entering transition (of which there may be at least three or more—the developmental student transition, the ESL student, then the matriculated student transition); then another kind of entering student—the transfer student; and the sophomore student, and the senior student. And what about the beginning graduate students? Note, a well kept secret: graduate student attrition is far higher than undergraduate student attrition and far more costly.
14. **Recognize and act on awareness, understanding that student learning and success is result of complex interplay of many variables including the: academic, social, physical, emotional, spiritual.** Point is that you don't get number one, academic success, by focusing solely on academics. Get it by focusing on all of these "dimensions". All of them support and facilitate academic success. This is why have to educate the whole student and only way to do that is with collaborative partnerships.

15. Practice the philosophy of one of my mentors: **always make decisions as if you could live with consequences for rest of your career at that institution and in terms of what might be best for the institution's greater good not necessarily the good of my unit.**

Just think what difference it might have made if bankers and investment brokers who brought us the Great Recession had had the big picture of what was best for our country instead of just their corporate bottom lines and their bonuses.

Salute to Those Who Provide Tutoring

3-30-11

I have just given a talk to the annual meeting of the Association of Tutoring Professionals. These are professional higher educators who administer tutoring centers on our campuses, recruit, supervise, train, mentor, encourage our student tutors who tutor other students and how have such a huge positive influence on each other. I believe these tutoring professionals are unsung heroes. They are outstanding developmental educators. They know what I know: all students are development; students are so good at helping other students; and students love to help other students.

This is what I told these tutoring professionals as to why I think they matter:

1. Because students need tutoring more than ever? Why?
2. Because of rising levels of under preparation.
3. Because of demographic changes leading to more students coming to college for whom college was not designed, which means most of you in this room, all but us few white guys.
4. Because you provide the mentoring and training experiences for tutors.
5. And because we know from research that tutoring has greater influence on the tutors than the tutees. So what you are really about is producing future scholars, leaders, successful people. People who will want to continue performing service in their adult life after college futures. And I think that producing leaders is most important role of America's colleges.
6. And because America is heading pell mell for a race to the bottom educationally. Some politicians are on an unprecedented attack on all things provided by government (except national defense), including health benefits for 9/11 workers. How many of you are government employees? And how many of you serve disproportionately poor people? Well we are at war with poor people too. And with those who help poor people. Where am I going with this disaffected rant? Where I am going is that there are going to be greater and greater cuts in full-time professionals providing educational support. Where does that leave us?
7. You matter because we will need to use more tutors and student mentors than ever. Because they are cheap labor. And in America today what we want to do is to reduce all labor costs. (Then why do we still have colleges to produce people to enter the middle class which used to be about increasing their standard of living?) We've gone crazy and reversed everything we used to stand for.
8. And because you really do care.
9. And because you really are on the front lines and you know better than most how the students are really experiencing the realities of academic lives.
10. And because you have had the courage to proudly carry the banner of developmental education which used to be as American as apple pie but which is now so politicized that it has become demeaned and denigrated because the people it serves are devalued.
11. And because you show every day that hi tech isn't enough. That we still need hi touch for the students.

Take a Student to Lunch (breakfast/supper) and See Who Learns the Most

4-4-11

The day before I wrote this I had the serendipitous opportunity to ride for four hours in a car with three female undergraduates, who talked incessantly for every minute of the trip and taught me a great deal. At the conclusion of the drive, which was to take me from a distant rural campus to a regional airport, I offered to take my companions to dinner. Oh, I am definitely going to do this thing more often.

What a simple idea: take a student to a meal and just have conversation. I learned so much. I can always learn more. I will never know all I need to know about the student experience.

This experience reminded me of who I am compared to my students, in terms of social class background and how that may limit what I automatically or innately understand about my students. Like most college educators, I am definitely middle class, and more accurately upper middle class. In addition, I am an example of what sociologists call downward social mobility—i.e. my parents were of a higher class in terms of income, social economic status (SES) than I am. My own “class” experiences makes me have to work harder to understand my students who are—or were—and some of whom may sadly remain---poor.

I listened over dinner to the life stories of these three courageous young women, all of whom were from working class families in rural Maine. All of them had parents who were dealing with chronic unemployment, or under-employment, the fluctuations of seasonal employment, the impact of severe health problems, losing property to foreclosure, changes in the local economy due to world-wide factors over which they had no control, the consequences of taking on debt through wanton credit card use, struggling to hold on to a first home in which they are under water, and more. These students are truly struggling to make ends meet to stay in college. They are the front line casualties of the Great Recession. But their courage, their learned optimism, their high aspirations, their desire to experience a different quality of life than their parents keeps them focused.

I couldn't help but asking: could I have coped with what they cope with?

What do you know about what's going on in your students' lives? Why don't you ask them to lunch and find out? One of the universal, cross cultural behaviors we all can engage in that shows others they matter to us, is our willingness to sit down with them and partake of food, and other forms of concomitant nourishment.

This recalls for me an experiment we conducted back in the 90's when I was still full-time at the University of South Carolina. We had a so-called “Brainstorming” group of innovative faculty, staff, and academic administrators, who met regularly to create new initiatives to improve undergraduate education. One idea we came up with was the desirability of increasing faculty/student interaction over meals. So we launched a program to recruit faculty who would be willing to have one meal a week, 16 weeks per term, with the University providing the meals. The cynics and skeptics said “no way the faculty are ever going to do that”. But we realized that the key was who made the ask. And we also realized that if we didn't ask, we would create a self fulfilling prophecy and not have faculty eating with students. And, we reminded ourselves that most people love to be asked—even if they decide to decline. So we had a most distinguished senior faculty member, one who had been recognized for both teaching and scholarly excellence (Professor Don Greiner) make the ask. And we were flooded with volunteers. Your campus could do it too.

What's On Your Mind?

4-6-11

Four short, common little words. But oh what a door opener for conversation, if only we would take the initiative.

I think we need to ask this of our students (and colleagues) more often. If you did so often enough, it would convey to them, if nothing else, your expectation and assumption that something is indeed going on in their mind.

And that says a lot in a country that seems to be preoccupied this week of my blog with March Madness, a unique American preoccupation in the month of March with “college” (i.e. post secondary institution level) athletics—in the sport of basketball in particular. I have been dismayed this week by how many more people I have heard speaking about March Madness than I have about America’s latest little war, against Libya, Congressional posturing over a possible government shutdown, and the most serious thing of all: as yet unknown potential fallout (pun) from a horrific environmental accident in Japan.

So what’s on your mind?

What’s on my mind are such things as:

1. The race to the bottom our country is headed pell mell on in a rush to cut all government spending for social services, the societal consequences be damned.
2. The ever increasing obsession in my profession with the minimal standard of retention (=a C minus and a pulse, which says nothing about what people have learned, can do, and value added received).
3. The increasing inclination to measure institutional quality primarily through wealth and resources, amount of money raised, etc.
4. The cascading of stresses on our students from the havoc wreaked upon their parents by the Great Recession.
5. The lifeboat exercises underway on our campuses as we reel from politically mandated budget cuts.
6. My fears that the cuts on campus will mirror the cuts in the larger society with the result that we make war on the poor in the academy just as we have in the rest of the society.
7. The unfailing belief in better living through new gadgets. As Emerson wrote in the late 1840’s: “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind”.

But, in spite of what’s on my mind, the students will be coming to us in droves again this fall, many not knowing what they want out of life with all the certainties falling around them, but still blindly believing that somehow the better life lies through us.

An Alternative to Cries from the Tea Party: Let's Hear It for a Tax Increase

4-11-11

I am fortunate to live in a beautiful, peaceful little town of 6000 in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. Like towns all across America, citizens are being prepared by local officials and newspapers for draconian cuts coming next year. We are being warned to expect mass firings of teachers and increases in class sizes in public schools. The news is very bleak. The political party driving these changes keeps saying "we have to make a change". There is no talk of increasing the ledger on the revenue side, only of cutting on the expenditure side.

After watching this terrible train wreck get closer and closer my wife and I decided to write your local paper and issue a call for a tax increase to prevent teacher layoffs and harm to our children. This blog post contains the content of our letter. I hope that some of my readers will consider writing a similar letter to their own local newspaper. Those of us who have benefited the most from education must take a stand to preserve it for those less fortunate and less powerful. Here is what we said:

Letter to Transylvania Times

Subject: We Support A Tax Increase to Protect Our Schools!

Dear Editor:

We write to share our preference for a tax increase to support our local public schools and to invite other citizens who might share our view, to join us in a similar expression. That's right: you read correctly—we want a tax increase.

As context for a position we would like to present in this letter, we would want it understood that the undersigned authors of this letter are two, married (to each other) County residents and taxpayers of "retirement" age and who do not have, and have never had, any of our five children in any of our County Schools because they all grew up in other places before we moved here. We have lived in the County for nearly twelve years. One of the many reasons we moved here from South Carolina was that when we were in the exploratory phase of considering Transylvania County as our future home back in the mid-1990's, we learned that the County's progressive minded citizens had approved a school bond referendum back in 1996 by a two-to-one majority. Given the demographics of the County, with such a large retired population of senior citizens with no children in the school system to be concerned about, we thought this was quite remarkable. It let us know that Transylvania County citizens truly understood the powerful connection between taxation levels to support excellent local schools and the overall quality of life here in the County.

Recently, our excellent local newspaper, which thankfully presents fairly all points of views, has been keeping us all well informed about the real threat of significant cuts in funding for our local schools and the dismaying possibility that there will need to be significant layoffs and termination of schools' personnel in our country. We don't want that to happen and we are willing to invest our hard earned money to support our local community and its educators and children.

One of us had a mother that used to joke "there is no future in old age". But there is, of course, a future for our children. We believe that our greatest responsibility is to do whatever is necessary, including making certain sacrifices, to provide the best possible future for our local children and hence for the quality of life in our local community.

We do not want to see a local property tax increase any more than the majority of citizens would. But we want even less to see any deterioration in the quality of our local schools. All of North Carolina, including this county, has made tremendous strides in catching up with the rest of the United States and has greatly improved public education over the past three decades. We do not want to see the clock set back. And, if necessary, we support higher taxation to prevent that from happening. We want better schools for our community and we are willing to pay for it. We have had our education. Now we want local children to enjoy the wonderful opportunities we have had in our lives, all made possible through education.

Please join us in expressing your willingness to pay more taxes to protect, preserve, and enhance our local schools.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Betsy O. Barefoot

John N. Gardner

Own Your Power

4-13-11

Last week I had the privilege, and the pleasure, of participating in the Fourth Annual Arkansas Student Success Symposium, in Conway AR. This meeting is an outgrowth of something I champion wherever I get the opportunity: getting two and four-year campuses together for partnership activities. In this case, three women from two institutions, Amy Baldwin and Ann Fellingner from Pulaski Technical College, and Sally Roden of the University of Central Arkansas, got together nearly five years ago to plan the first annual convening of representatives of two and four-year colleges in Arkansas. What has become now an annual series, co sponsored by the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges and the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, has succeeded in bringing together like minded higher educators from both post secondary sectors, as they have never come together before.

I have attended each year, as this series emerged from Foundations of Excellence work engaged in by the two founding institutions—and I am the ostensible leader of the non-profit organization that provides “Foundations of Excellence”, a self-study and planning process to create an action plan to improve first-year student success and retention. This year I did several sessions at this conference. A week later, one of the participants in one of my sessions wrote me: “ I left the conference encouraged to do what I can that doesn’t require the approval of others”!

I believe this attendee had what I so wanted all my students to experience in any of my classes: an epiphany. In fact, I consciously taught for epiphany, for my students and myself. What she wrote me really grabbed my attention.

I think what she was saying that we higher educators can’t help but absorb our larger culture and in particular, the helplessness, the anxiety, the vulnerability, the disposable nature, that so many Americans feel. They feel so powerless, so intimidated, by their employers who send them constant messages that they can easily be replaced, that they dare not speak up about the injustices they see going on around them.

In contrast, we higher educators have the privilege to work in an environment that cherishes a much higher degree of personal tolerance, personal choice, and, of course, most sacred of all, academic freedom. Yet even in the culture of the academy, due in part to significant lay offs and outsourcing, emulating the corporate model, more and more of my colleagues feel vulnerable and they are silenced. In spite of this, many still have extraordinary degrees of personal freedom.

Freedom to do largely as we please, as long as we responsibly meet our professional obligations; freedom to think, study, write and speak as we please. Freedom to question sacred cows, myths, ignorance and hypocrisy where we see it. Freedom to challenge constituted authority, as long as we do this respectfully and within the prerogatives granted to us by the academic culture, especially for those of us so fortunate to hold faculty rank with tenure.

Sadly, I think the majority of us are becoming silenced. We too have become fearful of

retribution. I believe however that many of us still retain extraordinary, by the standards of the corporate culture, great degrees of personal freedom. There are, as my conference session participant wrote, all kinds of things we can do without seeking permission, and sometimes without seeking forgiveness. We still have, again by the standards of the external culture, extraordinary degrees of personal freedom.

So, if we don't speak up, take a stand, challenge injustice, make impassioned calls for social justice, who in our country can afford to do this? More than ever, I believe we have a moral obligation to own our power. It is a privilege. We must use it responsibly.

How College Affected This Student: Why I Make My Students Make The New York Times A Part of Their Daily Lives

4-18-11

Oh, there are so many ways that the college experience affected this student, now 45 years out of college. One of them was getting into the habit, really the addiction, of reading The New York Times, daily. I owe it all to my political science professor, freshman year. He told me that if I really wanted to get a lot more out of his class, I would make this a habit. He urged me to read the full texts of the Supreme Court decisions, of political candidate speeches, and other important documents. This really jarred my consciousness as The Times was not allowed in my suburban New York City home by my corporate father who saw the paper as far too liberal. Interestingly, my political science professor was from an extremely conservative wing of that discipline, but he really wanted me to experience multiple perspectives. And that I did. And now can't do without, every day.

Throughout my teaching career I have required my students to read The Times. These are the reasons I give them for this requirement:

1. I want them to read what is regarded as the most influential news organ in the world.
2. I want them to see what the President of the United States reads each morning. And many other world leaders too.
3. I want them to see what The Times is saying that will influence the movers and shakers of our country who check it out faithfully, even if they don't agree with its editorial positions.
4. I want them to see not just reporting of the news, but reporting that becomes news!
5. I want them to read each day a truly interdisciplinary teaching tool—covering a wide range of topics from the integrated perspectives of many disciplines. It's like having a complete college curriculum all in one paper.
6. I want them to read one of the last remaining examples of "in-depth" print journalism.
7. I want them to read challenging prose that will build their vocabulary and stretch their critical thinking capacities.
8. I want them to read the paper that was won more Pulitzers than any other.
9. I want them to read something each day that will make the events and trends of our world "relevant" to even the most unengaged college student. The Times is truly "relevant".
10. I want to get my first-year students reading and thinking at the level we used to hold back for the upper divisions in the major. What a waste. We need to be awakening to the world our newest college students.
11. I want to introduce my students to a behavior that I hope they will continue to practice in adulthood after college, just as I did, and I do.
12. I want to introduce my students to one of the pillars of support for our democracy, to keep our citizens informed and our government honest.
13. I know that when students look back after college they will remember that I made them do this during college.
14. I want them to experience what it really means to be "fair and balanced"!
15. I want them to be teased with the print version and drawn in to the excellent, voluminous web support.

I want them to join the exclusive and inclusive club of educated men and women around the world who read an internationally influential newspaper.

Job # 1: Dispensing Wisdom

4-20-11

Much has been written and much said on the roles and purposes of college, and about what we have been able to measure as the empirically verifiable impacts of the college experience. And, we all know that when asked, the first thing that the majority of entering college students will tell you when asked why are they in college—well, something to the effect of being able to get a job, earn a decent living, etc.

But when pushed, and given the time to be more reflective about it, I think there are many students with us for far more than just eventual access to a better job. I think instead they are on a search for wisdom. And I think that should be our job # 1 to dispense it. So where would they find wisdom? Oh, so many places.

They can find it in great literature, in research, in the teaching of all disciplines, and in the counsel and advice they get from people like you.

Back in 1985 my colleague at the University of South Carolina, Jerry Jewler, and I did a book (now out of print) called College is Only the Beginning. And in it we had a chapter entitled "Decoding Professors." We would require our University 101 students to read this essay and then go out and interview a professor to see what they could learn, and if they could obtain and discern any wisdom.

I was reminded of this recently when I was contacted by an instructor of the first-year seminar at my alma mater, Marietta College, to tell me her students would like to conduct an interview with me. I agreed and asked them to prepare questions in advance for my preparation. We did actually have this interview and the following are the questions posed to me, all of which I managed to address in the 50 minute class period:

1. Why is it that you choose the career path that you are in now?
2. What is it that made your first year so bad?
3. What is the deciding fact that got you thinking about starting this program?
4. Who was your mentor and what did your mentor do to turn you around?
5. What did you do at Marietta?
6. Why did you choose Marietta?
7. What did your mentor say when he thought you were not coming back?
8. What is your greatest accomplishment?
9. Who are your influences?
10. Why did you decide to stay at Marietta?
11. Did your family support your decision to stay in school?
12. What didn't you like about Marietta?
13. How did you discover Marietta?
14. Is there anything you regret about your experiences here?
15. What are some negative events that motivated you?
16. Who was your favorite teacher?
17. What are some positive events that motivated you?
18. What advice would you give current students?
19. What do you like most about what you do now?
20. What do you dislike about what you do now?

Both before and during this activity what really interested me was/were the questions the students posed, what they had decided they wanted to know. They had done some research on my background on the internet which influenced some of the questions they asked. When we finished all of their pre-interview questions, they had one more for me: what is your philosophy of life?

I have to believe that what these students wanted to know about me, are exactly the same kinds of things your students wonder about you. If you ever hear people say that students aren't interested in us, don't believe them. They are troubled about many of the figures they see, hear, and read about in the media and they are in search of models that they could emulate.

To close the loop on this, the instructor of this class wrote me several hours after the interview and had this to say about the student reactions to the class:

"Their initial comments were along the lines of, "he's a cool dude," "he isn't THAT old," "I want to be like that guy," "he could have definitely been in our class," "I want him on my mud volleyball team for Doo-Dah Day," and "where can I sent him a thank you note?"

We are processing it in writing, so I hope to be able to send you some more solid thoughts (again-if they survive Doo-Dah Day-ha ha!). Again, I can't tell you enough how much I appreciated you taking the time to do this. It actually made me start to think about how I can incorporate this kind of discussion with other alumni who can share their experiences and wisdom. I already have the FYE 105 "Survivors" talk to the class, but it may be motivating for them to see any other students who loved their time at MC or have grown to love it be able to discuss their process. You inspire and motivate me, and I was glad to be able to share you with the students.

Thanks again!"

So what are you doing these days to "inspire and motivate" your students? They really do need and deserve it.

The Tail Wagging the Dog

4-25-11

Recently I was a co-chair/co-moderator of a panel presentation/discussion at the annual meeting of the nation's largest regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission. The title of this "Roundtable" session was "Rural and/or Small Institution Environments: Challenges for New Student Success". I blog here about the most interesting point (for me) to emerge from this 75 minute activity: the tail wagging the dog.

Specifically, the tail wagging the dog in many, many small and/or rural institutions, is the extraordinary influence of athletics on every aspect of institutional life and operations:

- admissions
- financial aid
- the curriculum
- levels of classroom engagement
- faculty/staff relationships
- institutional governance
- the role of alumni
- town/gown relations
- student discipline issues
- patterns of student dating, socializing
- patterns of student alcohol and drug use
- student priorities for time allocation
- student sleep deprivation
- standards of ethics in all areas of campus life

The session focused on many aspects of the ways in which small and rural colleges attempt to work with their students, with many opportunities, problems, challenges, strengths and advantages. But the area of greatest consensus was that the tail was wagging the dog, that the allocation of attention and resources to athletics was the primary driver for institutional values and rewards. One institution reported that this year its student body was "only" 73% student athlete which was a great improvement over several years ago when it was over 90%. This concern about the excessive influence of athletics was characteristic of institutions from all 20 states represented, and both four-year and even community colleges—some of which in rural areas do have not only athletics but on-campus residential accommodations.

This conference followed shortly on the heels of the annual US obsession with March Madness, the athletic equivalent of the college basketball World Series. What struck me was the contrast between the stereotypical institutions where we think the role of athletics looms large (Division I, large, fraternity/sorority/heavy drinking, on campus residential culture all associated especially with football, returning alums, and the corporatization of collegiate sports) and these small, rural institutions. In reality, it appeared that when considering proportionality, the impact of athletics was far greater at the small places than the big ones, even though to the naked and

untrained eye one would never assume this. Conclusion: the influence of athletics and its value systems and their inherent conflict with the traditional values of the academy, have truly trickled all the way down the food chain. There is almost no place we can escape this.

So I have asked the Commission if next year we couldn't have a session specifically focused on the tail wagging the dog and what is its relationship between how we go about academic quality assurance in the US: through a process we call "regional reaccreditation." I am confident they will arrange such a session and I predict it will fill the house and result in a lot more educators leaving more disturbed than when they walked in the door. But that would be a good thing.

Author's note: this blog was written by a former, small college, Division III, varsity athlete!

At Last, We are Finally Asked to Sacrifice

4-27-11

Americans told like to be told we have problems or even remotely suggested that we might not be first in all things that matter. Some of us remember what happened to President Jimmy Carter's ratings when he gave an oval office speech sitting there in a sweater, urging us to turn our thermostats down to conserve energy; and went on also to warn us about a "malaise" inflicting America's collective psyche. Americans rewarded him by making him a one term president.

And then we had President George W. Bush who launched an unnecessary, unprovoked war, while simultaneously cutting taxes for the wealthiest Americans and spending away an accumulated budget surplus, while exhorting us all to "go shopping".

And the pendulum has just swung back. Finally, we have a President who told us on Wednesday, April 13 in a speech at George Washington University about the national deficit problem, that we all needed to "sacrifice". It's about time. Admittedly, one party has been saying consistently that we need to cut programs and support for the poor, children, and seniors while cutting taxes another 10% for the wealthiest of Americans, but that strategy wasn't being called "sacrifice", although if enacted, it clearly would be a "sacrifice" for most Americans for the benefit of a few Americans. No, now we have a President who is finally telling us we ALL need to SACRIFICE. I think the majority of us, even though we long for the not-so-long-ago days when we could use our ever increasing in value homes like the ATM machines they became, we know that sacrifices have to be made and most of us believe that all of us should make them. What will be the verdict on this President's call for "sacrifice". Stay tuned for November 2012. At last we have a clear defining of differences from which to choose.

In recent years there has been much praise, deservedly heaped upon "The Greatest Generation", those who served our country during World War II. I was a child just after that war and I can remember both my parents and grandparents talking about the sacrifices they made. They told me how they went without gasoline, had to stay home, lacked many food types, and all volunteered at something to do with the war effort, like one of my grandmothers who folded bandages every day for our wounded. We prevailed because we sacrificed, all of us.

I am wondering how this call for sacrifice will play out on campuses. Our institutions are microcosms of the larger society. The same values play out there too. There are haves and have-nots. There are the richer and more powerful. Many have already been asked to sacrifice and have. Will our leaders at all levels emulate the President and call for shared sacrifices? The jury is out. I am making some predictions and my initial read is that although the academy is assumed to be more liberal, that many of its financial choices will be more similar to the opposition party than to what the President is calling for with his urging to "sacrifice". What do you think? And what are you doing about this in your own sphere of influence?

A Perspective I am Going to Keep Reminding Myself Of!

5-2-11

If I have any regular readers of this blog, I am sure it will come as no revelation when I say that I am aware that I am becoming increasingly despondent about the direction my country is moving in on what I have come to call its "race to the bottom." But I had a message sent to me today from a close friend and colleague, Dr. Elsie Froment, who is a Canadian historian (of US twentieth century history). She is also a senior academic administrator at Trinity Western University in Vancouver.

Her message with a perspective I am now going to share reached me a day after I returned from the state of Maine, a place I love to visit and work in as I have had occasion to do frequently this year. I always "return" to New England thinking in advance that those people aren't as crazy as the rest of the country. But upon reading the Portland newspaper's report of current new legislative initiatives, I was stunned to see that a bill has been introduced to reintroduce billboards to the state. And now here's a whopper: another bill to bring back child labor. This particular bill would end the current limitations on the number of hours a teenager could work while in high school and would permit instead students through the age of 20 to work an unlimited number of hours; and here's the kicker: it would make it legal to pay them a new SUB minimum wage! As we move forward on our educational race to the bottom, now here is a policy that definitely should be emulated by other states. Discourage students from studying more in high school and further distract them and weaken their preparation for college. What are these people thinking? So this is what I find looking for sanity as I leave my home state for several days where here in North Carolina a legislator of the same party has introduced a bill to authorize North Carolina to develop its own separate currency!

Back to Dr. Watt: she visited the University of South Carolina for the better part of two years in the mid 1990's, to work in the University's archives, including a review of my own papers, in order to study the impact of the social protest movement of the late 1960's early 70's on the launching of the so-called "freshman year experience" international movement. If this subject catches your fancy you really should request a copy of her dissertation. It will enable you to look at our present educational and social crises and help you see opportunity in them for positive transformation.

In her message she shared with me this perspective: "The larger scene can be discouraging but persistent, peaceful, personal, integrity in public service generates a legacy of positive change in countless people's lives. The FYE history documents that".

I lived through that history and she is absolutely correct. I need to keep reminding myself of this.

What Did I Accomplish Today?

5-4-11

The day before I wrote this blog I did something very satisfying: I mowed grass along the right of ways for about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile on either side of the mountain road which leads to our home. It really needed it after all the spring rains we have had combined with our North Carolina warmth. It looked so much better after I mowed. I could see what I had accomplished. The outcome was clear and measurable. It was also satisfying. That is why I like mowing my grass.

But I wouldn't want to do this every day. And I wouldn't want to earn my livelihood mowing grass. There was a time in my life when I thought I would however. That was before I went to college and discovered "the life of the mind". When I was in high school I had a little landscaping service business. Had six other teenage boys who worked for me. We cut grass, did some small landscaping jobs. I was very proud of our work. My job was to get the jobs, schmooze the customers, supervise my fellow teenagers, and do a lot of the grunt work myself. I always felt a sense of accomplishment. My father was scared to death I wouldn't want to go to college. And he was right, I didn't. But he offered me a deal: one year of college and if I didn't like it, I could return to my landscaping work.

So I went to college and loved it and never returned to landscaping. But I have been in a vocation where I do ask myself most days: what have you accomplished today, John? Can you see what you did? Is it measurable? Was it satisfying to you and to others?

I think we all need to be doing something where we can ask those same questions and be satisfied with our answers. And that is why I like mowing the grass every now and then.

When I was younger, but an adult, I had a father-in-law. He was a humble, old-fashioned carpenter who built homes and other things made out of wood to make people happy, primarily women. He was probably the most content man I have ever met—that is content with his vocation and therefore with everything else. Every day he could see what he had done. Every day he pleased someone with his work, who would live with that work for years and be satisfied with it every day. My step son chose to follow in this man's footsteps, and after finishing his BA (which I made him pursue just as my father did me) he became a carpenter, which he continues now 21 years later.

I like to think I am a carpenter who occasionally mows grass. I build things (in the world of higher education) that last and that please people. And they and I live well for years afterward with what I helped build for them.

We can all aspire to that. You have to keep asking: "What did I accomplish today?"

Joining the Students for their “Journey”

5-9-11

When I was an undergraduate, I discovered the discipline of English in my senior year. What a shame. I swear: had I taken the two profs I took for English in my senior year in my first-year instead, I would have become one of those English majors that Garrison Keillor talks about so fondly.

One of the many things I remember was the idea of having a novel's protagonist engaged in a “journey” was a central motif of literature, not only our own, but other cultures as well, whether we were talking about the Odyssey or Huck Finn. Same basic idea: individual growth and change while being tested during a journey.

Yesterday, my wife and I both went for a routine periodic check up with our new physician. He is new because the one we had had for nearly a decade moved out of our area and we very luckily were referred to a gentleman who strikes us as a real winner.

So my new doctor told me not once, but twice yesterday that what gives him such great meaning about his practice of medicine is the opportunity and the experience of being part of peoples' “journey”. And he told me he would be there for me on my journey. I wanted to hear that and I needed to hear that as much at age 67 as I did at age 17 when I started college.

So this made me think: what would be the impact on our entering college students of today if we more consciously used this ancient metaphor of the journey, and just said to them, preferably repeatedly, that we were committed to being a part of their journey?

This reminded me of why so many college students like (me) to come back at Homecoming: not only to catch up with friends, but to see the faculty who told them long ago they were part of their journey.

“Til Death Do Us Part”

5-13-11

This blog is written at the end of the first day of a two day reunion I am having with two of my best friends from college. I met both 50 years ago this fall when I was an entering freshman. One of these two has a terminal illness. The other has had a life threatening illness and is doing much better than the aforementioned friend. I love these two guys “till death do us part”. We decided recently that given the deteriorating prognosis for one of these guys that the three of us ought to get together soon while we still could. This experience is instructive

So, what are the lessons? Some are:

1. The college experience that I and other middle class American late adolescents in the last two quarters of the 20th century had was powerful and of lifelong influence.
2. It was life transforming.
3. The most powerful influences in it were other students.
4. It fostered the establishment of lifelong relationships.
5. Those relationships are as important as any in our lives.
6. They matter more than the deals we have cut and the money we have made.
7. They are priceless.
8. I am really bonded to these guys, and some women of the same time period too.
9. For us it is truly “til death do us part”
10. The college experience in America is now drastically different for the overwhelming majority of college students who do not go to one place and stay four years, who do not live on campus, who do not become active alumni, who do not stay in touch, and who do not come back for homecoming and other reunions.
11. I would like to say that experience is not better or worse, just different from my own.
12. But in my most honest moments I know I was privileged to have been able to experience college in a way that would make possible these bonds that last til death do us part. And I know that as the American middle class shrinks, and the kind of college experience I had becomes less and less possible for more and more students, I really do believe what they will receive instead is truly inferior.
13. I am saddened by this.
14. So I have to do as much as I can in my own professional work time remaining to insure that the normative college experience (e.g. for commuting, transfer students) is still as powerful and life transforming as we higher education social engineering change agents can make it.
15. My life is greatly richer, deeper, better, because I have had these relationships til death do us part.

Commencements: What Would You Tell Graduating Students?

5-18-11

I have just delivered a few days ago a commencement address. Have lost track of how many of these I have done, at least a dozen or more. And I have attended several hundred of these ceremonies in my career. And I have loved every one of them.

They are far better than weddings because everybody ends up making and taking some vows. And there are so many more people in the ritual for whom this is such an important rite of passage. It's like everybody in the hall graduates in some way in that ceremony—not so in weddings.

Even if you are not about to give such an address, I think it is a useful exercise to think about what would YOU tell the students.

The most challenging commencement talk I ever gave was one to a graduating class of students in a prison college program. All seven of the graduates were serving hard time in the South Carolina maximum security penitentiary. Four of them were serving life sentences for capital offenses. So I couldn't tell them to "go forth" and the other platitude of "the truth shall set you free" was not literally operative either. But I worked harder on that speech than probably any I have ever given. And it was a moving experience. And those families of the graduates were just as proud of their graduates as any of the traditional commencements I have ever participated in.

Back to my original question: what would YOU tell your students?

Of course, the temptation for the older to give the younger is irresistible for most of us. So what advice would you give them?

Given that commencement forever will be a benchmark point in time in the graduates' lives, what do you tell them about the era in which they are graduating.

Personally, I think it is important to remind graduates of who helped them get there. And I spend a lot of time giving thanks to the key stakeholders and investors in this accomplishment. And I urge them to give thanks to certain types of people in their college experience. And I urge them to reflect on the current state of our country and remind them that now they are going to serve our country. But this is just my approach. What would you tell the graduates?

Please don't dismiss my question because you are not slated in the near term to give a commencement address because I think you could use your ideas in response to the question for something else. This fall new students will be joining you, returning students too. Much of what you might say to departing students can apply to new and continuing students. There is much in common to beginning and ending rituals and how the elders of the tribe communicate to the developing new members of the clan. It's all about laying out for them a vision of what really matters. They need our help. That's why they are there.

Musing Upon the Commencement of Annual Vacation

5-31-11

I had an experience in the few days before I begin an annual vacation with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, that has me musing and hoping that I will soon forget it. Betsy and I spend a week—or actually more each year—at the annual Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. This is an arts lover's extravaganza with a plethora of options for fine drama, classical music both orchestral and chamber, jazz, ballet, modern dance, opera, choral music and more. We already have tickets for more than 20 events and we won't stop at that in this wonderful historically preserved city with some of the best dining options in the country. I really need a rest.

This week I gave a speech to a group of college presidents. Overall they were an appreciative audience, I think. But one of them really nailed me and gave me feedback unchallenged by the others that she was disappointed that my presentation was not sufficiently "data oriented". She reminded me in a mildly lecturing tone that "we are a data driven system". I was well aware that my talk was though loaded with intellectual concepts, educational philosophy and principles, a value system, a call for advocacy for certain practices, and my exhorting them to do certain things. To the extent that I used data to advocate for certain practices, it was connected to retention, an outcome I am quite ambivalent about as I have written previously about before in this forum

Well, she was correct. My remarks were not data driven. They rarely are. It's not that I am not interested in data. In fact, in my work at the University of South Carolina, some of my most important educational leadership decisions to drive improvement of activities were profoundly influenced by data produced for me by external researchers on the effectiveness of programs that I was responsible for. It became my mantra to constantly tell others what I had learned from data driven assessment and what decisions to drive improvement had I made based on the data. But I still wasn't a data person. I was still trying to fulfill the original objective of the President of USC who conceived of University 101, Thomas F. Jones, my first mentor at USC. That overarching goal was "to teach students TO LOVE the University. And I am persuaded we did. We learned how to do that. And we trained hundreds of employees how to do that.

But how do you count and measure whether or not students love the University and their experience there? In my career I have had (and still have) many other goals that I suspect are not very easily empirically measureable. I wanted to be a positive role model for my students. How do I measure that? I wanted to teach them to be open to new and different ways of seeing the world? How do I measure that? I told my students on the first day of every term that what I most wanted to do was to "teach forepiphany". I explained to them that it was my greatest hope that each of them could have at some point in my course a transformative insight that would influence the course of lives. To me that is what college should be all about, any kind of college for any kind of student. But that's not what today's campus leaders, most of them, want to hear about because they know that their funders, legislators, etc don't want to hear about teaching for epiphany. After all, if it can't be tied directly to something measureable, and to jobs, and retention and graduation rates, it can't be worth doing.

I think I am going to spend lots of time on this vacation thinking about how I can measure whether or not our students have epiphanies.

How About Something Positive?

6-13-11

One of my colleagues in our Institute, rolled his eyes at me the other day as he gave me some feedback (which I always welcome no matter what the feedback). His message to me was that my blogs had a tone of distress, negativism, pessimism, and he encouraged me to write about something positive. He added a reflection that his own aging process was leading him to see things in our society with much more concern now that he was fortyish than when he was in college. That was a nice way of saying he could understand then why I who am considerably older might see things with an eye of even greater concern. But, I took the message to heart and have been thinking about what is it these days that I feel positive about, particularly in my context of being a professional higher educator. OK, here goes:

- I am pleased to see that the regional accreditors have so much more influence than they used to. They are truly the big dogs driving much of the pressure on us for continuous improvement.
- I am pleased that the concept of “self study” as driven by the regional accreditors is now much more meaningful, taken far more seriously, and an impetus to innovation on many campuses.
- I am pleased to see how much positive attention the community colleges are getting from, seemingly, all sectors –the public, the lay press, state and federal governments, and our country’s president. I think this is long overdue.
- I am encouraged by how much more discussion there is by administrators and faculty alike about the necessity for us higher educators to take more responsibility for student learning. We really have become serious about insisting on measures for student learning and efforts to improve that.
- I am truly gratified that the concepts that I have worked so hard for related to the desirability of institutions paying more attention to new students, have truly been institutionalized.
- I am pleased to see the growth in interest in paying more attention to transfer students. I believe they are a population that encounters great discrimination and that we cannot possibly increase our nation’s degree attainment rates without more attention to this growing population (currently about 62% of students pursuing a baccalaureate degree).
- I am pleased to see how successful women students have become in our colleges and universities not designed for them.
- I admire greatly the courage and trust millions of our students display towards our higher education system that they continue to come to us in ever greater numbers, in spite of the challenges that many recent grads are having in securing optimal employment

This Summer: What Are We Orienting Them For?

6-15-11

How I wish what passes for college and university orientation during the summer before the new fall term actually begins were really an introduction to the purposes of college. How I wish we seriously engaged our students immediately in dialogue and presentation on the purposes of college. But, usually we don't. Instead, we get them "oriented" which primarily means placement testing, academic advising, registration, socialization, familiarization, "processing"—admittedly all important. But very rarely do we get into the nitty gritty of what are the purposes of our enterprise? What differences do we or can we make for our students? Just what are we trying to do for them besides help them find a career, get a job.

I am not a fool. I fully understand the imperative for college to be a vocational preparation exercise. I understand the huge financial sacrifices our governments, our families, our students, and our institutions are making to make college possible for our students. So I am not proposing that we say to students, hey forget it, there are far more important outcomes of college than getting a job. But to be honest, I really do believe that—that there are far more important outcomes.

I am resigning myself to the reality that the American economy is not going to fully recover for many years. This means I am resigned to the fact that many of our college graduates are going to be underemployed and dealing with very high levels of frustrated aspirations. We of the intelligentsia know this. We know the American economy is not going to be able to absorb all these graduates at the employment levels they have dreamed of. We know that the Great Recession will have produced a whole next generation of students who will not be as well off as their parents.

So, I think it is time we started stressing at the very outset what college can do and must do to make the meaning of life more rewarding, even if our students are not employed at the level they aspire to. More than ever I think it is morally incumbent upon us to demonstrate the values of a college education for how we live outside the world of vocation.

So for those of you, my readers, involved in any kind of orientation of new students this summer, what are you introducing students to in terms of the purposes of college? Are you offering them anything to think about in terms of how they may use college to plan a life of meaning and rewards outside their vocations? I hope so. It does matter how you start. This is the period when we shape expectations and show them how college may be different from high school, and, thank goodness, different in some important ways from the rest of the culture.

The International FYE Movement Continues

6-20-11

I don't have any idea how many of my readers have founded something and left it as a legacy to successors. But in my case, one of the things I am most proud of and pleased with is the job my successors in the USC National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina (Stuart Hunter, Nina Glisson, Jennifer Keup, and their conference organization team) have done to institutionalize, sustain, and expand the series of International Conferences on The First-Year Experience which I founded in 1986.

This week we offer our 24th International Conference, this one hosted in Great Britain as many of them have been previously, in Manchester. This meeting will follow a meeting of a spin off organization, the European FYE Conference series. One of the most important and useful outcomes of our series has been to serve as a catalyst for a European adaptation of which we are also most proud.

As approximately 250 delegates convene from 23 countries, they will represent the higher education systems of:

Australia

Belgium

Canada

Denmark

Finland

Grenada

Jamaica

South Korea

Japan

Republic of Ireland

Netherlands

New Zealand

Nigeria

Norway

People's Republic of China (Hong Kong)

Republic of South Africa

Singapore

In Some Important Ways I Have Not Left Home

6-22-11

Since 1986 every summer I have looked forward to travelling to an international location to participate in a conference series I founded in 1986: the University of South Carolina's International Conferences on The First-Year Experience (IFYE). This post is written on the eve of the opening of the 24 annual IFYE Conference in Manchester, UK. I would be less than honest if I didn't acknowledge that one of the things I look forward to most is the opportunity to return to the United Kingdom, a country I am comfortable in, knowledgeable and respectful of, and where our IFYE series began. This year I have returned and have been having this nagging and disappointing realization that in some ways I have not left home.

Here are some similarities between our two cultures that tell me we have "converged" and are not nearly as distinct as we were when I started this series in 1986:

1. The Brits have emulated the US in funding student participation in higher education through personal debt acquisition on the part of students. What was essentially "free" higher education to the student in Britain in 1986 my first year of offering a conference for this higher education culture, now averages 9000 pounds or more than \$14,000 of out-of-pocket cost to the student and his/her family.
2. British students have come to regard higher education as a consumer commodity not a privilege and hence have become very critical of what they are paying for. The government has been tracking the increase in reported unresolved complaints filed by students against their universities. In the week I arrived in the UK the government "named and shamed" the two universities with the highest rates of failing to resolve student complaints.
3. Both countries are dealing with huge national government deficits exacerbated and essentially caused by financial deregulation and mismanagement of the investment and speculative real estate sectors.
4. Both countries are pursuing a conservative ideology, not based on any facts or proven track record, that reduction of taxes and governmental operating costs will promote economic growth.
5. Both countries are punishing the working middle class and the poor, blaming them for the economic ills by attacking national health systems, and government funded pension systems for government employees.
6. In effect, both countries have shifted the blame for the economic meltdown from the affluent financial ruling class to the working and non working middle and lower classes. In both countries this represents a spectacular rewriting of recent history.
7. Both countries have massively cut national subsidies to local/regional governments, leading to widespread public service cutbacks at the local level.
8. Both countries are cutting back the social safety net for the least powerful, the poor, the sick, the infirmed.

Acting Like A Full Professor with Tenure in Contexts Where You Are Not a Full Professor with Tenure Blog

6-27-11

Several months ago I gave a speech to a fairly large convention audience. And I subsequently received feedback from multiple members of the audience that at first glance, made me wonder if they had attended the same speech.

When I look back at my own college experience, the professors who really grabbed my attention, forced me to think and to critically examine what I believed, how I was living, where I was going, were those professors who were most honest about their beliefs and values. I was so thankful I attended a liberal arts college where the power of the liberal arts—and academic freedom was so in evidence.

I had one professor who one day gave our class a homily on how to conduct oneself in an interview with an FBI agent who was investigating whether or not you were a “subversive”. This was in the early 60’s, still in the era of the Red Scare, and a student had filed a complaint with the FBI about this particular professor. I so admired this prof for not being intimidated.

As I have aged and become a senior member of the academy, one of the most dominant, consistent lines of feedback I get from my audiences is one of appreciation for taking a stand on the issues that confront our times. This happens to me so often that I have concluded that back home on their own campuses they must have leaders who never take—at least publicly—a stand on the issues that confront us as a country. I realize that campus leaders today are so concerned about offending powerful constituencies that the campus needs for this or that. But I have to wonder: if those of us with true professional freedom, career and job security don’t speak out, who will? In this vein, during this year I have been speaking out more and more for the need for social justice, both in our country and on our campuses. And folks come up to me after my speeches and tell me they never hear language like that on their campuses; or that they haven’t heard language like that since the 70’s. Oh my, no wonder we make war on the poor now in America and let the rich escape paying their fair share.

I remember a decade or so when I was a featured presenter in a series of teleconferences organized by my employer, the University of South Carolina. We had many thousands of educators view these teleconferences and they sent in feedback, all kinds of it. I had viewers asking “Does John wear a wig? His hair looks like shag carpet!?” And I had lots of viewers saying: “John is too serious; he needs to lighten up, smile more”. The teleconference organizers took that feedback seriously and got me a “smile coach” (I am not kidding). But I also had many people praise me for “John’s sense of humor”. So I often wondered if they had downlinked the same teleconference.

I learned many years ago from my students in South Carolina that what they most remembered was me: how I came across to them, how I related to them, how I got inside their heads and rattled their cages with lots of unorthodox ideas. I knew that I was giving what I called “the gift of self”—exactly what I wanted to give and what they wanted to receive. They wanted honesty, and authenticity. They wanted leaders at any level who stood for something and asked others to consider that “something” and confront their own values in the process.

So, yes, I admit it: I act like a full professor with tenure in contexts where I am not—and that’s every context I speak in except at the University of South Carolina or in activities sponsored by the University. And I don’t plan to change. If we higher education leaders don’t speak out for a system of values that may at times be contrary to the dominant values system, who will? Who else can afford to? Who else has so little to lose? And our students so much to gain in terms of intellectual and personal challenge.

We Have Failed This Generation

6-27-11

At each of the conferences I attend each year that are sponsored by the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, my favorite session is one we offer at every event: "Spirituality, Authenticity, and Wholeness". We have been doing this since 1998 and were inspired to do so by Sandy and Lean Astin, Laura Rendon, and Art Chickering who facilitated a similar session we first attended to see this process in action. I just attended the 24th Annual International Conference on the First-Year Experience and in this particular session a Japanese higher educator made this statement: "We have failed this generation".

"We have failed this generation." I immediately wanted to confirm my assumptions about what she meant, but also to push this notion as far as I could in my own thinking about my own country's higher education culture.

My Japanese colleague was referring to the recent man made damage and trauma caused after the natural tragedy of the tsunami when it soon became apparent that the much longer term disaster was one caused by the melt down of an electric power plant. How could this have happened in an era when science, engineering, and corporate cultures have triumphed in so many ways over nature. Well, the more we are learning the more it appears that WE caused this disaster:

*We should not have allowed such a plant to have been built so close to the coast

*We should not have permitted the collusion of government regulators and corporate managers who looked the other way about breaches in operational security, partly out of concerns for the corporate bottom line but also out of our supreme modern man confidence that we can manage such technologies at a very low level of risk and an accompanying high tolerance for a public that is kept deliberately unaware. Yes, we were smart enough to have known better. We had the technological capacity to have prevented this but not the moral and ethical integrity, courage, values, to prevent it. And, hence, we have failed this generation.

I can think of all kinds of examples in my own country where we have not used the moral reasoning, the ethical integrity to have prevented many human misfortunes which we have the intellectual knowledge to prevent or alleviate.

But her question got me to thinking as I often to about the fundamental assertion behind my work of the last 12 years when I have been leading a non-profit organization whose goal is to get colleges and universities to take more responsibility for student learning (that was the mantra of the senior higher education program officer of The Pew Charitable Trusts, Russell Edgerton, who awarded us our first grant to initiate our particular version of this larger line of reform work in American higher education.

So, my thinking went, if we were to truly take more responsibility for student learning, how should we be serving this generation, particularly so as not to fail them. What can we be doing in our great colleges and universities to insure that there are no technologically caused disasters like we have just seen in Japan? What can we do to produce a more different kind of business executive, broker, financier, who will use their college taught talents in ways that are different from those that just caused our own financial tsunami? I could go on.

I keep asking different versions of her question:

Twelve Years Later: What Do I Miss?

6-29-11

In a few days it will be June 30, the anniversary of my "retirement" date from full-time active service from the University of South Carolina. Each year I use this as a marker to reflect on what life is like away from a daily existence on a University campus, what I have learned, what (and who) I miss, what I have gained.

Admittedly, my "retirement" was "early" and after thirty-two and a half years. And it has not led to retirement at all. I still have an appointment with duties at the University as "Senior Fellow" (translate: elder statesman). And I have a full-time appointment as a CEO of a non-profit higher education organization that does planning with colleges and universities.

My annual reminiscences (not ruminations, not regrets) usually go like this:

I am glad I left at the top of my game and before I was at the point when people wanted me to go

I am glad I agreed to a retirement party extravaganza which we turned into a celebration of all that my work had stood for in the First-Year Experience. It was a wonderful ritual for closure.

I am glad I held a personal, one-on-one closed door conversation with every person who reported to me so I could share what they had meant to me

I am thankful that the leaders I worked for and with wanted me to have some continuing involvement and hence my appointment as Senior Fellow

I am proud of the job that has been done by my successors in making our first-year campus programs and our national and international work stronger than ever

I am grateful to my University for being more invested in our work than ever

I am thankful I spent my entire campus-based career in one place and never even flirted for a second about cheating on USC and forsaking her for another

I am thankful for all the outstanding leaders I worked for, all of whom I learned from and grew as a result of.

But my most recurrent thoughts are about what I miss the most: I miss the students

I miss the faculty I miss the staff

I miss the collegiality, the camaraderie, the partnerships

College as Lab for Real Life

7-7-11

When I look back on my own college experience and ask myself in what context did I learn the most that influenced how I practice my profession 4 decades later, my answer is: student government! I learned that my small, liberal arts college was a lab for real life. I learned about how organizations function; how decisions are made; how and why conflicts develop; how vested interests get pursued; what brings people together to do the right things. As I look back, particularly in contrast to what I just saw the British government doing during my visit to the UK in June, and now what my own government is doing—or not doing re the crisis around raising the US debt ceiling—I realize that I learned adult behavior.

And I am desperate to see some adult behavior in our Congress. I bet even some of our students are. This makes me wonder what we can teach our new students this fall as they join us about adult behavior. How are our colleges and universities models for adult behavior, unlike our Congress.

What will our students see the adults doing?

Will they see the adults putting the institution's (country) ahead of more parochial interests? Will they see examples of civil discourse?

Will they see examples of reasonable thought and action, based on evidence and facts as opposed to ideology?

Will they see ideology trumping all reason and pragmatism (e.g. we cannot absolutely and under no circumstances raise the organization's revenue stream—we can only cut expenses—can any of our students manage their own personal budgets his way?)

Will they see any examples of real statesmanship?

Will they see examples of leaders saying "I won't come to your meeting for discussion, or stay in your meeting, unless we refuse ahead of time to discuss certain topics!"

I learned a long time ago that there are many big things in life I do not and cannot control. So I have to focus on what I do control. I can't control what happens in Congress but if I were still on a campus I could influence, and even control in some ways, what my students would see us adults doing.

I so hope my colleagues on campus will welcome our students this fall to a bastion of civility and rational discourse; and to a community that is as generous as possible to all and lacks the mean spiritedness we see so prevalent in Congress.

What our students will see this fall is up to people like you who read this blog. Please let them see us acting like adults.

What I Got for Firing All the Teachers

7-11-11

I was urged recently by one of my colleagues to try to be more positive in my blog. And I have been trying. But I think I am losing the battle. This is about the most recent example of my struggle.

Last Friday July 1 when I engaged in one of my great daily pleasures, purchasing my New York Times, I got a clue, but one I didn't pick up on immediately. Each morning, seven days a week, when I am in town, I go into this shop that sells good newspapers, thank goodness, to small town citizens like me in the western North Carolina mountain town of 6000 people where I live. The clerks know me by name, and more than that. And they never fail to engage me in conversation which is very easily done.

So last Friday the clerk says, "You get to pay two cents less today in tax on your paper." At first it didn't dawn on me the significance of what she told me.

Five days later I have figured it out.

In my adopted state last November the voters, as was their right, turned over both houses of the State Legislature to one political party that hadn't controlled both houses for a century. And one of the actions that party took was ending a temporary half cent on the dollar sales tax that was due to expire this June 30. And with the expiration of that tax no longer being paid by 9.5 million residents, it meant that the state had significantly less revenue to operate on. As a result the new budget has cut about 20,000 teacher/education related jobs, massively cut preschool education and whacked higher education like nothing since the Great Depression.

And so I suddenly realized this is what I get/got. I got to pay 2 cents less a day. And 20,000 of my fellow citizens lost their jobs. I am so privileged. I am a higher educator that still has a job and now 2 cents a day more to get by on. This has finally come home to me in a way I can measure. Now I get it.

How About A Curriculum for An Antidote to Societal Pursuit of Greed and Selfishness?

7-13-11

I write this posting in what we all hope are the waning days of the Congressional/Presidential debate over how to address the raising of the US debt ceiling. While any interested citizens have had ample opportunity before this latest exercise of brinksmanship to observe the power of rationalized gross selfishness and greed, these past few weeks have really laid these values out for all to see, and for many to shake their heads at.

In my whole adult life following the politics of our great nation I don't think I have ever seen such stubborn adherence to an ideology that rationalizes avoiding having to ask the rich and the fortunate to contribute more to their opposites. This is one of the grandest political values clarification exercises I have ever observed. And its implications really frighten me for the future of our country.

Last fall my wife and I took a six day cruise on a barge in France. We were serendipitously booked on this craft with two other couples—a wealthy medical practitioner and a hedge fund manager, and their well educated spouses. They were literate, cultured, tolerant, extremely well travelled, hard working, highly successful, and from a very affluent and sophisticated suburb in northern New Jersey. We saw life in many of the same ways except they absolutely detested our newest American President. Why? Very simple. He wanted to increase their taxes. And for these people, how going from a 35 to a 39% marginal tax rate would change their life style one bit was beyond my capacity to rationally comprehend.

In 2000, during that Presidential election campaign, when the press reported that Vice Presidential candidate Dick Cheney had earned approximately \$20,000,000 during the four prior years as CEO of Haliburton Corp, and during same period had reported less than 4% of his income for charitable deductions—this was a moment of truth for my wife and me. Mr. Cheney was asked about this appallingly low level of personal philanthropy and told the press that “my family is my favorite charity”. My wife's and my epiphany was that we could certainly do far better than 4% on our much, much smaller incomes, and we resolved to do so and we have done so.

As I think about what I would like us to do for our entering college students this fall, I would like to have them experience a “lived curriculum”—and an explicit one, not what has been called a “hidden curriculum” that might result in producing college graduates who would be less selfish than so many we are hearing in the media who are so strongly opposed to increasing taxes on the wealthiest of our citizens. What kind of experiences out of class would we provide for students that might motivate them, no matter how successful they became materially, to make a lifetime commitment to pay a fair share of their success for the greater good of the country.

I guess I am asking how do you teach unselfishness? How do you teach a culture that is counter to the culture of greed? If it is anything we have seen since the financial meltdown in 2008, it is the power of greed—and greed as practiced by some very, very well (college) educated bankers, brokers, investors, lawyers, who have wreaked such havoc on the welfare of the whole society.

As the evidence mounts of the correlation between de-regulation of the financial industry, and the growth of inequality, and the increasing disproportionate benefits being accorded the rich, how can we possibly get our students to aspire to being less selfish, less greedy. I believe we could teach for these outcomes if we really wanted to.

How to Teach Big Picture Thinkers

7-18-11

I have just written a blog on some very rough and preliminary thoughts on the need for a college curriculum to teach unselfishness. That has inspired me to think about something that I think is related: how to teach students to be what I call "big picture thinkers." What do I mean by that?

Well, I guess I mean people who are both thinkers and doers but from the perspective always of what is best for the overall organization, country—as opposed to what is best for my organizational unit, my group, my political party.

As some of my readers know, I had the privilege of working full-time for the University of South Carolina for over three decades. And that privilege included working for multiple leaders who modeled for me how to be a big picture thinker.

Example: one day in 1983 I magically became an instant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for five of the University's "University Campuses". My boss, the Chancellor, sat me down for an introductory homily, the kind for which he was a legend in his own time and asked me if I knew "the difference between a Vice Chancellor and a Chancellor". I replied that I did not. The answer: "the VC is a mouse trying to act like a rat; and the Chancellor is a rat trying to stay out of the trap!"

He went on to present two main operating principles:

1. "Sometimes, John, we are going to be presented with making a decision between what is best for our units of responsibility and what is best for the greater University. And when faced with that choice, we will always choose the University." OK, I got the picture. That was "big picture thinking."
2. "John, in this office we are going to always make decisions as if we were going to spend our whole careers in this job at this university, and in a manner that we would be able to live with the consequences of those decisions for the balance of that career." And we did. He and I both spent our entire campus based careers at USC.

And I had another boss at USC whom I bet if he said it once, he preached to me at least a hundred times: "John: we must do what is best for the people of South Carolina." Now there's a novel idea.

I could go on. I had so many mentors that taught me how to be a big picture thinker. Actually, for me, this process started with my corporate CEO father who worked for the same paternalistic company for 43 years and used to preach to me: "Son, find a good company and stick with it." Admittedly, it is easier to learn big picture thinking when you are surrounded by people who love the organization, in part, because the organization loves and honors them. Gone are those days. And my process of learning how to be a big picture thinker continued in college, especially when I got very active and held a senior leadership job in Student Government—and when a number of my professors took me under their wings to mentor and teach me how to do what was best for the College.

So how do we teach "big picture thinking" in this new era? I still think it all comes down to mentoring, how adult educators mentor our students, and how we senior educators mentor our junior colleagues. But we

Dear Readers

7-20-11

Dear Readers:

Several years ago I had a much younger staff colleague who literally had to push me into starting this blog. And so I did. I suppose it has some similarities to academic writing in that you write for an audience that may be largely unknown to you. Of course, I do know who some of my readers are. And that helps. But I guess I am not stirring the pot enough because I don't hear from very many of my readers. So I am curious: are there topics you might be interested in having me share my thoughts about? And would any of you readers be interested in writing a post as my guest?

Sincerely,

John N. Gardner

Retention is a Real Slog

7-27-11

One of the absolutely worst Secretaries of Defense in US History has given us one thing to remember him positively for: reminding us of the word “slog”. His use of it so famously was in description of the Iraq war, a disaster which he had a great deal to do with designing. I am going to use the word to refer to the holy grail of undergraduate higher education in non elite colleges and universities: retention.

Achieving retention is a real slog. It is very, very difficult to do, short of going out and recruiting lots of “better” students which everyone else wants too. I have been helping colleges try to achieve this ephemeral goal for four decades now. I know.

This reflection is occasioned by my giving two talks the day of this writing, at a meeting of one of our six regional accreditors. And I had two rooms full of conscientious and worried higher educators under a lot of pressure from their campus leaders to improve retention. And I felt compelled to tell them that this is just very hard work and many of our approaches just aren't going to work at all. I told them about my top four—that is strategies that do seem to “work” as demonstrated by externally validated evidence: first year seminars, learning communities, Supplemental Instruction, and Foundations of Excellence®. But even these take a true “slog” to make them work. I know. I lead one of these for 25 years (a first-year seminar); and I have been working another, Foundations of Excellence with 197 institutions since 2003.

Unfortunately, we higher educators are just like many other consumers. We work for people who want a quick fix, now, not a slog that will take years and years. We are looking for a panacea. A silver bullet. This makes us vulnerable.

And the good ol' American free enterprise system is responding to our desperation. Even I who thinks he has seen everything by now in the way of the marriage of shameless commerce to the academy—what I refer to as the military-industrial-university complex, now find myself marveling at all the for-profit entities that huckster their wares promising to achieve retention for their clients. Just today I noted one of the largest college textbook publishers offering in an ad in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) “student retention solutions”. As a textbook author myself, I would never made such claims. I know I couldn't support them. Caveat emptor. Retention can only be achieved by a slog: yours, ours, and mine. I invite you to join me.

Why “dorm” and “housing” are terms that have long outlived their usefulness!

8-1-11

Recently I wrote my briefest post on record and simply asked what my readers might want me to comment on. To date I have received two replies. I will quote below from one of them:

"I would love to hear more from you about the role of the residence hall on the college campus. I'm a residence life professional, so I'm always intrigued to hear respected folks like yourself talk about your thoughts on the "dorm" and its role."

So I am going to do exactly as requested. This may be more of a rant than a “talk”.

I think anyone of my generation (college in the 1960's) knew that the “dorm” experience was a powerful one. But we also knew that it could be more than it was. It is now at many institutions thanks to the professionalization of those who manage college residence halls and the faculty and senior administrators they work with who aspire to more closely integrate the academic with the residential..

My most basic perspective on the importance of the collegiate residence hall is that they are places where the most important influencing on college students takes place: the influence of other students. Hands down the greatest influence on students during the college years is the influence of other students. Many residential students spend more time in residence halls, literally, than in any other context of the college experience. This is an argument then for colleges and universities to pay more attention to the importance of “the halls” than many do. Perhaps the best argument though is that on-campus residents are more likely to be

I like to think of these facilities, ideally, as constituting sanctuaries, places of peace and refuge, and powerful learning, not just places to eat, sleep, and make love. It has struck many of us then that the term “dorm” just does not do them justice. And so we stopped in the last quarter of the 20th century using this terminology of “dorms”. Thank goodness. They were never just dorms.

The other form of truly egregious terminology though is the very name we give this component of the college experience—“housing” and that same term is used as a common descriptor for higher education professionals who manage collegiate residences. About a half century ago, sadly, the higher education accounting rubric was restructured and the fees generated from student residences became classified as “auxiliary revenues”. In other words the halls were being structured to become cash cows. This meant that only the “business” staff of the institution were to care about what went on in these facilities.

Unfortunately, the connotations of “housing” did not speak in an inviting way to other educators, particularly faculty.

I believe that the continued use of the term “housing” continues to invite misunderstanding about what these environments are really designed for; the term continues to suggest then that the residential component is divorced from the faculty driven curriculum component. I maintain the term also invites outsourcing. The whole outsourcing movement is truly overtaking our campuses and a myriad of functions which we the faculty used to be responsible for.

My “Dream Sheet” for Improving On-Campus Residential Living

8-22-11

When I was in the military I was introduced to the concept of a “dream sheet”. This was a form one could complete and submit to request a “PCS”, “permanent change of station”—in other words a move to another duty station. I filled on out. Requested Lakenheath, Britain, Weisbaden, Germany, and Vietnam, in that order. Got Shaw AFB, Sumter, S.C. instead, and then/thus my wonderful career at the University of South Carolina. I believe in dream sheets.

So when one of my readers asked me for some commentary on improving the undergraduate residential experience, it made me think of a modified dream sheet—my wish list for kind of hall of residence I might want my grandchildren to live in. Here goes, and not in any order of priority:

1. One in which there is faculty apartment and a faculty member and his/her family in residence. These are known as “residential colleges” which is not an oxymoron.
2. One in which new students are not segregated with other new students and instead are fully integrated with older, wiser, students
3. One in which new students may receive instruction in classroom space in the hall, in sections restricted to residents of the same hall.
4. And ideally, one in which students participate in learning communities of at least two courses linked together
5. And one in which students are registered for a first-year seminar with peers from the same residential complex.
6. One in which the managers of the hall do not report to “Business Affairs” signaling that the institution does not view halls of residences as auxiliary revenue sources. And one that doesn’t even report to Student Affairs. No, I’d like to see the halls reporting to Academic Affairs, out of a central realization that more than anything else these halls are spaces where students have their most powerful learning experiences.
7. One in which the resident assistants are well trained and compensated. The most important form of compensation will be academic credit awarded for successfully completing a two term course that combines instruction in principles of leadership and group dynamics.
8. One in which the RH staff are the first line of defense for suicide prevention and where no student goes unnoticed.
9. And one in which the RH staff are selected out of a highly competitive process that uses academic merit, at least Dean’s List average, as the most heavily weighted criteria. Why would I want C+ students role modeling for my grandson?
10. And one in which several nights a week the residents of each section (floor?) the RA’s gather the residents for the equivalent of what I experienced as a camp administrator in the summer of 1970 and was known as a “cabin chat”. Other than making camper safety the number one job priority for each of my ten counselors, their second highest priority was to devise engaging topics for the

If Only the Campus/Country were a Symphony Orchestra

8-7-11

On the weekend immediately after the credit rating agency Standard and Poor's downgraded the US credit rating because of our political dysfunction and lack of predictability, I found myself enjoying a symphony for one more reason.

I live with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, in Brevard, North Carolina, a small mountain town in the western Appalachian mountains. The best known thing about our town is that it is the home of the 75 year old Brevard Music Center and Summer Festival. The presence of the Center in Brevard is what drew Betsy and I away from South Carolina to live here. The Center is a non-profit higher education training institute for gifted young classical musicians who participate in a seven week festival of daily performances every summer.

The weekend was the closing weekend, but it was identical in format to all the other weekends during the seven weeks. There are major ticketed concert events on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons. The Center has three different orchestras.

So, like every other weekend during the festival, Betsy and I went to three symphony orchestra concerts. I have long been a lover not only of the repertoire but of the ritual. This weekend I found it especially moving now that our great country has lost more than a touch of its glamour in the world order.

The symphony as ritual is so predictable. It is so orderly. It is so formal. It is centuries old and we count on it and are always rewarded. None of the members dress like slob. None of them are badly behaved while on stage. All follow the maestro's instructions with baton or hands no matter what the individual members of the orchestra think of the leader. There is no evident competition or jockeying for position. In fact, the positions do not move during the performance. Before the symphony begins we know the Concert Master will come out to fill his/her empty chair before the Conductor appears. The Concert Master will cue the other musicians. The Conductor will then appear and greet the Concert Master. We know how this is going to play out. There is diversity in the orchestra members: men, women, and different ages, ethnicities, races, national origins (and we assume sexual orientations) represented.

The communication exercise they engage in entertains, enthralls, moves, soothes us. It reaches resolution and closure. We exit fulfilled, sated, but still wanting to come back for more. The whole process has what Congress lacks: predictability, discipline, a focus on the common good, decorum, and no need for compromise to find an outcome satisfying to all.

No wonder I especially loved the three orchestras I heard this weekend.

What could we do, short of making orchestral music majors out of all college students, to interject into our collective campus lives and cultures some of these deeply satisfying elements of the symphony experience. I offer this as a sincere and serious question. I believe we could do this. It is pretty obvious that our students and country need to be experiencing these outcomes in more venues and contexts than symphony hall.

We Produced These Leaders: Where Did We Fail?

8-15-11

On the weekend that one of the three US credit rating agencies announced it was down grading the credit rating of the United States of America, and accompanied this with a statement which the whole world has also been thinking and saying—namely that the US government had become dysfunctional and could no longer be relied on as the pillar of stability in a highly unstable world—I found myself wondering what could we higher educators have done to prevent this sorry state of affairs? After all, we did provide college educations for these Congressional leaders who have succeeded in manufacturing a crisis that did not need to happen.

*How did we produce such ideologues? Didn't we educate them to think more critically and analytically?

*Didn't we educate these future Congressional representatives about the perils of interjecting religion into politics—separation of church and state, etc?

*Didn't we teach them Econ 101 and basic history of economic depressions and recessions in this country—and most importantly what happened in 1937 when the Democrats cut off the stimulus and threw the country back into the Depression again only to be extricated by World War II?

*Didn't we teach these adults anything about basic manners, courtesy, decent listening skills, a modicum of tolerance?

*Didn't we teach them anything about seeking consensus and compromise? Apparently not. They have just learned win at all costs?

*What did we teach them in student government? Surely many of them were campus pols?

*Didn't we teach them anything about big picture thinking, about the need to pursue the common good, occasionally putting the needs of the overall body politic above personal interests?

*Just what did we teach them? What did we do that had any lasting impact?

*And most importantly, how can we do better going forward. The most common purpose all of us have in higher education, no matter what our roles, our disciplines, our institutional types is: producing the next generation of our country's leaders. We all have to own this. We have them in each and every one of our classes and student organizations, teams, anywhere we gather students in officially sponsored institutional activities, credit and non-credit.

Surely we can do better. Even more surely, we must.

Take Home to Campus Lesson from Debt Ceiling Debacle

8-17-11

We have really known it for a few years now that the US political process and legislative process had become dysfunctional, but it was the debt ceiling debate that confirmed it for hundreds of millions of people around the globe. The credit rating agency, S and P, was absolutely correct in its rationale arguing the US government could no longer be counted on as having the ability to take the necessary policy decisions to address its financial problems. As I have been doing my whole adult life, I immediately found myself asking: what is the take away lesson from this debacle for us higher education leaders? The biggest one for me is that campus-based leaders need to make sure they aren't running their institutions like our Congress. Our minimum aspiration must be to lead better than Congress to avoid campus dysfunctionality. So here's what I think our campus leaders need to do/not do:

1. Put the long term institutional interests ahead of our own. Campus over self.
2. Act as if we had to live with the consequences of our decisions for the rest of our careers even if we move on to new institutions seeking upward social mobility.
3. Pursue policies that have a basis in reason, empirically verifiable evidence, and on values—but not primarily inflexible ideology.
4. Pursue consensus and practice a willingness to compromise.
5. Do not pay more attention to inflexible dogmatists than they deserve. They will wreck your campus if you cede too much ground to them.
6. Treat your opponents with civility.
7. Stay with your core objectives and do not flit from one administrative idea de jour to another. Your campus needs predictability. So stay the course. Lack of predictability leads to instability. Instability leads to anxiety and unwillingness to innovate and take risk.
8. Do not throw complex problems begging for new and big picture thinking to reactionary groups for solution and resolution—e.g. like Congress. If your Faculty Senate can't get beyond partisan divisions, create new ad-hoc leadership groups to grapple with the big issues.
9. Make sure your top leaders (CEO/CAO) have tenure; otherwise they will view every tough question demanding a decision or position as one that could lead to a vote of no confidence and that will stop them in their tracks.
10. Tell yourself every day that you can and must do a better job of leading your organization than the Congress of the United States.

My Favorite Day of the Year

8-17-11

I guess if I were pushed as to what is my favorite day of the academic year, I would have to choose the opening day, the day the faculty first gather after a long summer's hiatus and the students return.

Commencement would be my second, but a distant second. For nothing matches this opening day for optimism, the opportunity to begin again, resolutions, and a wonderful occasion to exchange gossip. And it's an occasion to learn what the administration has done over the summer in our absence—we always return wondering about that.

I am thinking, and therefore writing, about this because today my wife, Betsy and I visited a small private university campus, and had the privilege of participating in this annual ritual. I just loved it. And I realized I needed it more this year than any in my now 44 year career. Why?

Because this ritual, the feelings it evokes, the traditions it follows, the hope it presages, is just so predictable. And I needed predictability more than ever this year.

What a year! Well, in case you have already forgotten it, something we all took for granted has just been wiped away: our United States triple AAA credit rating. Our President has told us, no matter, we are "still a triple AAA country". I don't think very many believe him. I know I don't—even though I would like to believe him.

And the ability of our Congress to act rationally and for the greater good of the nation—we now know we can no longer respect that.

And what about my father's political party, the party of fiscal stability? We can no longer count on it to pursue the kind of rational policies that any household in America would if it could: both cut expenditures and raise revenue.

I could go down the list. The list of our established institutions, the ones we used to count on. We can't anymore.

But we can count on students to return to us each year, including many new and naïve ones. They come to us no matter what we charge them, no matter how much more our fees went up this year than the consumer price index. So let's hear it for death, taxes (oops, by this I mean no new taxes), and new students. Thank goodness then for the students. I need them more than ever. And I need our optimistic beginning of school year fervor too. Let's try to make it last—at least 'til midterm. And if it doesn't, well that's OK, because we get to do this again next year.

An Education Major for Anyone?

8-23-11

Today I was visiting a campus and got engaged in a conversation with a school of education dean. We were commiserating about a matter that has been on my mind since earlier this year when Republican legislators in multiple state legislatures went on an unprecedented attack on public employees, especially public school teachers with publicly funded pensions, as being one of the root causes of our national financial malaise. Suddenly teachers were being vilified as overpaid and underworked public servants who were principally responsible for their state's dire financial circumstances. This was a remarkable piece of historical revisionism indeed. Talk about deflecting blame! Instead of focusing on politicians who led us on a binge of deregulation in Republican and Democratically dominated governments, and instead of looking at the roles of the credit rating agencies, mortgage banking houses, major investment houses, the creators of mortgage securitizing and credit default swaps, now we had truly found the villains: public school teachers.

As this extraordinary public relations sham was unfolding, I found myself asking: why would entering students this fall even remotely consider becoming public school teachers? Their pay is frozen. Their benefits are being cut. Their future profession is being vilified in the media by unscrupulous politicians. They can no longer assume a guaranteed public pension with health benefits.

And that's where I found myself today in this conversation. Why would students want to borrow money to earn a bachelors degree for this low paying and now lower status profession than ever?

Now this does relate to us higher educators.

These future teachers would have been teaching our future students. So just who is going to do that?

And we higher educators think we have problems. Most of us cannot imagine the working conditions of public school teachers: the amount of administrative work they have to do, record keeping; lack of autonomy; teaching to the tests with all the related stifling of creativity that that may imply; using personal funds to buy classroom supplies; having to deal with unappreciative parents and in some cases having to visit the appalling circumstances in their children's' home lives; working 8-9 hours straight with no break(s) and then having to go home, tend to their personal responsibilities, and then prepare for the next day's classes; having to work weekend and summer part-time jobs as servers in restaurants. Seriously, when is the last time you were waited on in a restaurant by a public school teacher? In my case I know— just five days ago. And I encounter this all too often. When was the last time I was waited on by a currently employed college professor: I can never recall such an occurrence.

My readers are not deans of colleges of education. But we need to help college educators to somehow sell this profession which is now in free fall in significance in our culture.

The Vacation Challenge to Technology Addiction

8-28-11

I confess: nothing makes me realize more acutely how addicted I am to my professional life than trying to go on vacation and simultaneously give up checking my e-mail. No wonder Americans manifest higher levels of stress and shorter life spans than many other developed countries. We really don't know how to "vacate" and we remain tethered electronically almost no matter where we go on vacation.

I just attempted a work week's vacation at the Outer Banks in North Carolina. I was in a beautiful, relaxing place. I had the best company/companion in the world, my wife, Betsy Barefoot, a woman who is always fun, relaxing to be with, stimulating in her observations and conversation. Shouldn't all this have been enough? How much better could it have been?

There were lots of other upper middle class tourists around and I noted as they sat and walked on the beach they were constantly interacting with and focused on a small gadget in their hand. This week I didn't get a full week to attempt to practice electronic vacation discipline and abstinence because my wife and I were subjected to a mandatory evacuation notice thanks to Hurricane Irene. But even before she came, I was failing vacation miserably—in that even though I tried to disconnect, I backslid and went on-line. Why do we do this?

- we see other people doing this
- an exaggerated sense of importance—my colleagues back home at the office really can't do without me
- a fear that I will miss something or someone important
- people expect to hear from me immediately
- if I am not available so and so will think that I am being derelict in my duties
- I really do need to know constantly that I am needed, missed, pursued by others
- if I don't keep up now I will be overwhelmed later particularly when I get "back" (thanks to the internet there is no longer a "back")
- my boss or bosses do this and they normalize what is expected of me
- this is just the culture of my organization
- this is just the culture
- this is just a habit
- this is a form of addiction
- this prevents me from thinking about other things/people that I would prefer not to deal with—by not procrastinating electronically, it allows me to procrastinate from what matters most in life

Surely We Can Do Better

9-1-11

As a career higher education leader there are, of course, all kinds of trade publications I read regularly for administrators and leaders of higher education. No surprise there. Nor is there any surprise in that the publication that I read the most faithfully that is not written expressly for higher educators is [The New York Times](#).

I have been doing this daily since I was seventeen years old and a freshman in college. I had a political science professor who suggested that if one wanted to be a serious student in his discipline that one really needed to read [The Times](#). I wasn't sharp enough then to realize how conservative he was. Nor would I have known the significance of this professor's own graduate school mentor at the University of Chicago, Professor Leo Strauss, the intellectual father of the "neocons" who brought us the invasion of Iraq. As I think about this now, I have to wonder how many of the professional conservatives faithfully read The Times as I do. Anyway, this is turning out to be a bit of a tangent. I was trying to make the point that this was just one of the many behaviors I acquired in college that have provided supportive foundations for my adult life.

So every day when I am home in Brevard, N.C I get [The Times](#) and one of my favorite things to do on any Sunday, is to read [The Sunday Times](#). In today's edition, there was an article in a section I generally do not read in any depth, "Sunday Styles". There was a piece entitled "After Class, Skimpy Equality". It was about the dominance on elite college and university campuses (e.g. Duke was the campus in particular focus) of men over women. An example given that really captured my attention was the reporting of an e-mail sent last fall by a Duke fraternity to 300 female Duke students inviting them to attend a [Halloween party dressed to look like sluts](#). Yes, you read that correctly: "sluts". And I quote from the invitation:

"Whether your (misspelling that of the quoted author, not this blogger) dressing up as a slutty nurse, a slutty doctor, a slutty schoolgirl, or just a total slut, we invite you....."

The article further reported that even though the invitation was widely circulated and became the source of heated controversy, and "official indignation" leading to the establishment of an official "Greek Women's Initiative", still hundreds of Duke women went to that party, with a reported "many" dressing in the manner in which they had been invited.

I just haven't been able to stop thinking about this. Now this isn't one of the nearly 4000 or so US NON selective colleges and universities. This is one of the most elite, highly selective universities in the world for a student body that is in every manner privileged. If there should be women anywhere who are smart enough, accomplished enough, self assured enough to not be enticed to such an event, it should be at Duke.

Perhaps this story caught my attention because I live in North Carolina. Or because I am married to a very smart Dukie. Or perhaps because in my work I see so many examples of women outperforming women in every area of college life. Or because I expected better of an elite college. Or because I just didn't want to believe this.

What Would YOU Do if Only You Had The Time and the Money?

9-6-11

This is about the exercise of writing concept papers for external funding as a source of generating exciting creativity

I just finished a week's vacation in which I just flunked setting my work aside. Instead, other than my conversations with my very smart wife, Betsy Barefoot, I found the most stimulating thing I did mentally was to generate, share, and exchange thoughts with one of my colleagues in our non-profit Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, Dr. Drew Koch. We were corresponding about a concept paper we are putting together for a foundation. I find at age 67 and 44 years into my career there are few exercises that I find more stimulating for what creativity and capacity for big idea generation I have left (actually, I find I have a lot left and am much better at this than I was even 10-12 years ago).

I will share an experience I had that I recommend to others, hopefully including you, dear reader, as a source of stimulation for the big idea—the big idea for you to contribute to improve American higher education. And any of this could do it. As my colleagues in my work group say: "If John can do it, anyone can."

I was introduced to this way of thinking by a professional godfather and mentor that I was/am privileged to have had, Russ Edgerton, former President of the American Association for Higher Education, and former senior higher education program grants officer for The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Russ and I ran into each other at a conference in Washington, D.C in January of 1998. He honored me by attending a session I was doing. And after the session he asked me if we could have a cup of coffee together. During the conversation that followed he asked me: "John, if you had one to five million dollars, and one to five years to do anything you always wanted to do but never before had the time or the money to do, to improve American higher education, what would you most want to do?"

Well, anyone that knows me would assert that I am rarely speechless. But I was in response to Russ's question. Patient and wise leader he is, Russ cut me some slack and suggested we get together in another couple of months to resume the conversation and to give me time to come up with an appropriate response.

We met two months later and I still didn't have a response. So the Foundation made a planning grant to make it possible for me to plan the answer to Russ's question. In turn, that made possible the first grant from The Trusts to lay the foundation for what has been me and my wife, Betsy Barefoot's, professional work since 1999.

I didn't realize then but the structure of the question, and its focus, would return to me time and time again, as the mental parameter for regenerating creativity to make possible new work to improve American higher education.

Thank goodness we live in a country that has this unique structure of the private foundation, a non-profit organization to invest and spend the largesse accumulated by leaders of capitalism. The enormously disproportionate business acumen and successes of the Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, Pew, Gates, Walton, leaders of US business, have, in turn, made possible a myriad of improvement strategies for our education system. And my wife and I have been greatly honored and privileged to be the recipients of such support to make new initiatives possible.

Reunion Anyone?

9-14-11

I can't believe it. I am headed this weekend for my 50th high school reunion. I love reunions. I have been to every one—both my high school and my undergraduate college. I think a lot about what it makes some former students want to return to reunions, and others very content to skip them. Obviously, this is a commentary on personalities, life histories and stories after school, and on the school experience itself.

I return to see old friends—out of fondness and curiosity. I return to rekindle old memories and to reflect on my life. I return out of loyalty (a truly passé quality in early 21st century American life). I return to pay respects to those few on the faculty and staff who invested in me. I return to renew certain pacts I made with myself about what kind of an adult life I was going to endeavor to have.

And I think a lot about what were the qualities of those two institutions that make me want to return. And that turns my thoughts to the characteristics of colleges and universities now. What if we were to create a type of college experience where no matter what the type of college, and its student demographics that our former attendees and graduates would want to keep returning? What would we have to do to engender this reaction? And who would they return wanting to see?

That second question is pretty easy for me to answer based on my own experiences and those of most of my peers. When former students return to reunions, other than wanting to see each other, they want to see some of their faculty. Too bad administrators and staff - hate to say it - don't pack 'em in at Homecoming and reunions. When I was a practicing college professor I actually would ask myself: "John, what would you have to do for your students (or this student) to make them want to come back and see you at Homecoming?"

So what would we have to do, what could we do at any type of institution to make students want to return? I suggest a simple list:

1. Affirm their self worth and dignity
2. Help them develop and discover a new and preferable identity
3. Get them really excited about learning and about seeing how much they could learn
4. Creating opportunities for them to experience vigorous interaction with their peers from which lifetime relations could and would emerge
5. Celebrating their accomplishments
6. Being there for them when they needed us
7. Intervening when asked and sometimes when not asked
8. Engaging them in powerful and meaningful rituals, rites of passage
9. In some ways, it doesn't really take much
10. Setting a compelling example for adult fulfillment yourself and urging them to emulate some of your values, beliefs, practices

Here's A Goal for You: Make it 'til your 50th

9-19-11

No, I don't mean "50th" as in years old, I mean your 50th high school reunion, which I just participated in. And for the sake of this piece, I could substitute 50th college reunion too, which I look forward to in four more years.

I have a close friend from college who when I told him I was going to my 50th high school reunion and asked him about his, he immediately gave me reasons why he was not going (in contrast to me): only had two people he wanted to see and one was an ex-girlfriend that he didn't want his wife to know about and he wouldn't go without his wife, and just in general didn't want to revisit that high school period of his development. Well, on the reunion I just completed, with my most recent and last wife in attendance with me, I met two women whom I dated at least once—I remember this, reminded them of it, and both feigned total non awareness of the event. This was not very affirming! I guess that was the kind of interaction that my friend wanted to avoid. But, in contrast, I really believe in participating in life marker events. I have done this faithfully as an adult as I pass through my own life and I have always recommended this to my students.

In fact, I view college as being full of "college life marker" events, which my wife likes to call "critical junctures". There are so many points when we could and should stop our students and ask them to reflect: where are they now; how did they get there; how does this point compare with another that might be comparable; and where do they go next. And especially: what have they learned from these markers that they can apply to future ones they want to achieve?

But this 50th, now let me tell you reader, this is a big one. You won't get another one of these. And it is a great opportunity for reflection. In previous reunions (I have attended every 10 year high school anniversary, and every five year college graduation anniversary), I have always been interested in comparing maturation levels by gender. For a number of reunions, I felt the women were still more mature than we men. Not this time. We men had finally achieved equality.

And I would compare the ravages of mother time on our bodies. And until this one, I always thought that life had been kinder to the women. Not any more. Now I think we are both equal. My wife pointed out to me two women "who had had some work done". But no men. She also pointed out to me two men who had "significantly younger looking wives". But we didn't note that about any women.

What I especially liked about this one was that the life jury was just about in. We pretty well know what our lives have amounted to, what mattered, what didn't. There are relatively few surprises and developments left in store for us, at least not any that we might look forward to.

In my class, there were 181 of us; 178 went to college. 84 attended this reunion. Of the attendees, 16 had been in the military. These graduates were from a very affluent community and we certainly wouldn't see that many comparable SES students today serving in the military—too bad. I was reminded that it really shaped those of us who were there.

These graduates regaled each other of testimonials about what such and such a faculty member had meant to them. I don't hear entering college students reflecting in that manner. And I chalk that up to much higher levels of disengagement (intellectually) in today's students.

Hedonism—or What's the Alternative?

9-12-11

For any thinking consumer of world news, let alone the domestic front news, it seems to me that there is very little that we can count on. The once exalted credit rating of the US downgraded. The failure of US foreign policy throughout the Middle East. The Euro based economy about to collapse. US Republicans pursuing financially disastrous fiscal policies. Hundreds of points up or down each day on the Dow Jones. Instability everywhere. What is a college student to think about this? Or is a college student to think about this? For those that do, what are choices?

The future certainly doesn't look good even for some of the very best educated. The old certainties in vocational choice (e.g. the security of public service sector jobs with their public sector pensions) are no longer certain. So what is a thoughtful college student to do? Just keep plugging along and hope for the best? Work even harder to leverage the odds of eventually rising to the very top? Job prospects look terrible after getting a bachelors? So just keep on going and get a graduate degree? Or, how about an alternative?

How about abandoning obsessive work and worry and just party on the Titanic? How about the pursuit of hedonism? I predict that we are going to see many more students taking this route. Moreover, I certainly wouldn't blame them. I wonder what I would do if I were just starting, or finishing, undergraduate school.

When I was in college, there was the draft followed by the Vietnam build up. There was also the Civil Rights movement, the anti-poverty movement, the women's movement, the students' rights movement, and young people my age were volunteering for VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) and the Peace Corps. I eventually volunteered for the Air Force. I never considered the hedonistic route, and I don't regret that now. But I certainly wouldn't question students who do choose hedonism today. Just as I don't question students who keep the faith, push on, stay on track, and volunteer for all sorts of things now to try to continue the improvement of our country. But mark my words, literally, this year will see the higher ed press with lots more reportage on hedonistic behaviors on the campus.

My 9/11 Was Not My Students'

9-11-11

We have recently commemorated the 10th anniversary of 9/11. All of our entering college students were old enough for that to register in some way 10 years ago. But given that many of them were still children, it may or may not be their generation's 9/11. I remember where I was ten years ago: in Provence, a most beautiful part of France, with my wife and a retired British academic couple, on holiday. That was a good thing because when we turned on the television late that afternoon our friends understood and spoke French and we didn't. We could only let the horrible pictures speak for themselves. I hate to admit that I couldn't help but wondering what will be the "9/11" for the students who enter this fall, 2011. Our second thoughts turned to the realization of who was in the White House and what in his previous life as an ex fraternity boy at Yale could possibly have prepared him to lead us forward.

This suggests to me an exercise of sorts for use with beginning undergraduates. Have them reflect on what they recall from the actual time period surrounding the attack on the United States by Al Qaeda. Ask them what they understand about the US response to this in terms of the more immediate invasion of Afghanistan, leading to now the longest war in US history; and then the voluntary war against Iraq. See what they understand about the financial consequences of the combination of increased expenditures for these two conflicts combined with a reduction in government revenues through lowered tax rates. Make sure they understand how these events influenced the presidential election of 2008; and what have been the successor administration's responses to many of these continuing challenges.

This could easily be combined with a discussion of other events in US history that are most often compared to 9/11, namely, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. And I think it is very important to add to those two, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 (and to be complete in this tragic litany, the assassination two months later of Robert Kennedy, whom most of our new students will have no knowledge of).

For my generation, it was, of course, the assassination of President Kennedy. Just as my father told me repeatedly that he could remember where he was, what he was doing (watching a football game in a stadium), and how he felt when he first received the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. In his case he wanted to volunteer for active duty but because he was managing a factory that made war materials he was deemed essential to the national defense as a non-combatant. I cannot recall all the times he told me how much he regretted that determination. More than I will ever be able to fully appreciate, I fear that lack of military experience shaped the rest of his life, particularly how he felt about it.

And then directly to me, on a beautiful late November Friday, the 22nd, I was sitting in a class in a course in political philosophy. I remember where the class was (what building—one my alma mater in subsequent years converted to a student union, but failed to get student input and the result was a colossal brick elephant largely unused by students!), and who my professor was. I remember him vividly as he had already had quite an influence on me. Two years earlier he had gotten me into a lifetime adult habit: reading the daily [New York Times](#). I didn't realize then because our country really didn't have such antennae as we do now—but he was really very, very conservative. In fact, as I later learned, he had done his graduate work at the University of Chicago and been one of Leo Strauss's students, Straus being the intellectual idol of the so called "neo-con" movement of the first decade of the 21st century, a group who collectively influenced the policy formulation in the Pentagon and the White House that brought us the invasion of Iraq. Our class was discussing its reading of Plato's [Republic](#) (one of the most influential books I read in college), and we were just at that juncture where Plato was going to reveal his answer to the question of "who should be king?" (i.e. philosophers). As I had learned this was really about a much more universal and eternal question: what is justice? It was so warm that afternoon in southern Ohio, that the classroom windows were open and we could hear a commotion of people outside on the campus. We soon learned that these were the bell ringers sounding the death knell for our dynamic, young president, who had inspired so many of my generation, particularly affluent children of privilege such as me. The class broke up in quiet confusion and shock. I left the building and wandered across the street where I talked to other students congregating. But I soon left them for my own solitary meditation, not prayer; I was not a praying kind of college student. Several days later when the decision was announced that the following Monday would be a class holiday in observance of the national day of mourning, to my utter dismay and astonishment, there was actual jubilation in my residence hall when my fellow student realized that the cancellation of classes for Monday meant only Tuesday classes remained before the Thanksgiving holiday.

began for 1963 and so, "might was well", cut the Tuesday classes and go home much earlier for an extended Thanksgiving holiday. My reaction to my fellow students was one more of a growing number of messages I was getting from my college experience that I was going to grow up and somehow be different—I didn't know how yet—from the conventional pack.

So on this past Sunday I thought of all these memories and much more. And I am still thinking about them. I hope you will engage your students in reflection on what all this meant, and means.

Blog: What Do We All Believe In?

9/28/11

I write as once again our great American democratic structure, so widely respected around the world for so long, is once again paralyzed, because we have discovered one more thing we don't all believe in: that disaster relief for our desperately needy citizens should trump all other considerations. You would think that after our recent national embarrassment on the world stage of our shameful invention of a debt crisis that nearly shut down our government we would have moved on and played nice. You would have thought that after the callous disregard by the US government for the dispossessed citizens of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, that we would never show such neglect again.

But, no, once again our government is deadlocked over another issue that is symbolic of our larger total lack of unity. This time the issue is disaster relief for the victims of hurricane Irene. It is not so much that we don't believe they should be assisted but that some of us believe that something else matters more, namely, how we pay for that relief. For the first time in our history a faction of our government is demanding that other priorities lose their funding in order to make disaster relief possible. So once again we discover another aspect of our lives as a community that we cannot all agree on.

So this makes me wonder about the community that I know best, the American college campus. What are our shared values, those beliefs that we can all gather around and affirm as totally shared by all? Whatever they are, we can't proclaim them enough.

So what are they? How about the belief in the value of attaining higher education? Yes, we could buy that.

What about the notion that all citizens ought to be able to access higher education? What about children of illegal immigrants? What if it means raising taxes to make higher education affordable? Do we share the view that access should be a birth right?

Do we share the belief in the American style of general education? Do we all believe that students should have substantial work outside the major? I doubt that we all believe that.

When it comes to my cause, what has become known as "student success", do we all believe this is the primary responsibility of our institution, our policies and practices, over and above individual students exercising their responsibilities? I do, but I am sure we don't all believe this.

I am not sure what we all believe in. But I think we ought to be discussing this and really working hard to affirm our common ground and our core values. Our students certainly aren't living in a country where there is very much consensus on anything. Our campuses must do better.

What Would You Do If You Wanted to Understand Today's Students?

10-5-11

What would you do if you wanted to understand today's students? This is a question I ask myself all the time. Yesterday was my twelfth anniversary of leaving full-time employment on a college campus. Although I have continued in full-time employment within the higher education context, it's not the same as actually working for a college or a university with direct, official, contact with students. I have been like a junkie in withdrawal hankering for a fix of student input to keep myself current. So what do I do for any kind of fix? Well, I live in a college town where there is a small liberal arts college (Brevard, N.C.) and I live nearby a college town mecca of sorts, Asheville, N.C. So I have lots of opportunities of sorts. This is what I do:

1. I "interview" (without them knowing that is what I am doing) a college student anywhere I can find them—most commonly as servers in restaurants or clerks in retail establishments
2. I visit at least one college campus a week and always ask to have at least one structured conversation with students
3. I jog on a college campus every weekday that I am home—and as I jog the campus it is very easy to simply observe them
4. A few times a year I do pro bono presentations at the local high school and/or a private school in South Carolina where one of my grandchildren is a student; this gives me a fix on what immediately college bound students are thinking

And for those of you who are more fortunate and actually work on college campuses, what could/should you be doing?

1. teach at least one class—in anything—no matter how senior an administrator you may be. For 13 years at USC I was a Vice Chancellor but I assigned myself a class every fall and spring just to have my own students
2. advise a student organization
3. read your institution's Facebook site
4. read samples of students' writing
5. walk your campus and observe them
6. talk to others whose official duties put them in closer contact with students than you have
7. ask for people in sensitive front line roles with students to keep logs, diaries, etc of student concerns and forward them up through channels (e.g. advisors, resident hall directors, professional counselors, first-year seminar instructors)
8. watch the same television programs they do
9. learn where they go on the net and follow
10. get involved in officially sponsored interaction groups in contexts where students live or spend a lot of time: residence halls, student union
11. bottom line: you have to talk to them, have at least a few educator/student relationships

Alas, it is very easy to get out of touch. You have to work at and be intentional about being in touch.

Let's Get Them to Tell Their Stories for Posterity

10-3-11

Some years ago when I was appointed on a full time basis at the University of South Carolina, we had a Canadian scholar, Elsie Watt Froment, of Trinity Western University in British Columbia, come spend parts of two years conducting research in our University archives. She was there to retrieve the "papers", the documents and correspondence, that traced the evolution of the so called "first-year experience movement, including many of my own writings, particularly in correspondence and internal documents. She was also there to interview and capture on audiotape all the still living players in the events that led to the establishment originally of University 101 and then the spawned larger movement to improve the first year. So in a very personal sense I became aware of the importance of "primary sources" related to my own work.

Somehow, the way my mind works, I connect this to a report I heard on National Public Radio about a new initiative of Story Corps that they are describing as a "national education initiative". In this year when the occupation has been so demeaned by Republicans blaming them as public employees for the financial problems of states, Story Corps, thank goodness, is asking us Americans to come into their booths and tell our own stories about what our teachers have meant to us. Who do we remember? And why?

This reminds me once again of providing opportunities on our campuses for students to tell their own stories, in their own words. What could we be doing to more intentionally capture these stories, and recording them as important historical artifacts of our times. What kind of value would there be to having our own version of Story Corps where our students could easily come in and tell their stories? How empowering to them might it be to let them think we cared about their stories? And that we wanted others to be listening to them too—and perhaps even be moved to certain kinds of actions too. All it might take is one sentence, one phrase, or the repetition by many students of one basic theme.

An illustration of the power of a phrase, I recall an assessment initiative undertaken by Virginia Commonwealth University more than a decade ago: the freshman prompts project. The idea was to use their first-year composition course to have several thousand VCU first-year students write one response a week to a "prompt" given in class each week for the purpose of this qualitative study on the nature of the beginning university experience at that university. After the thousands of prompts were collected at the end of the term they were sorted, collated, analyzed, tabulated and converted into a meaningful synthesis. The one student response from these thousands that caught the most attention and drove the most subsequent action, was a student who wrote in response to the prompt "Large classes are for..." the following: "Large classes are for teaching not learning." Wow. That became a cause célèbre: what could the University do to enhance learning in the context of large classes.

Much more recently, just this past May, I delivered a commencement address to a nearby community college. The President had politely and very appropriately asked me to limit my remarks to a 10-12 minutes max. But he failed to tell me that I would be following a student commencement speaker. And that I did, a 40's or early 50's something woman who laid out for the graduates the hardships she had experienced and triumphed over. Wow. It really grabbed my attention and I just had to respond in some way as I began my own remarks. So that added another 2-3 minutes to my talk and hence made me run over the allotted specified desired length. But that student's words were just what that audience needed to hear, especially the administration, faculty, and the local taxpayers who support that institution financially.

I can only imagine the number of epiphanies that might emerge if more campuses collected the voices of our students and then gave them some thoughtful consideration as a basis for our efforts to improve the learning experiences of these students. In the short run, maybe some places can launch their own versions of Story Corps.

How Do You Talk to Students About Gender Differences?

10-19-11

This posting is occasioned by my happening to do a pro bono presentation this week to a group of high school, college bound, high SES, private school, students. Topic was college choice and accomplishing this in a partnership with family, school, and self. It is impossible, of course, to talk about selecting a college without talking about the college experience itself. And when I think about the most striking components of the college experience I can't help but mentally noting and usually commenting on, how that experience differs significantly by gender.

And when I do mention that, it usually gets the college bound students' attention. Of course, I have often discussed this with currently enrolled college students. Like many higher educators, I am concerned about the many evidences of under performance by our males. Other than reporting that factually, there are many questions about how one might deal with this topic constructively with the students themselves.

I do start by describing what we know empirically about performance differences and some of the data about how the genders experience college differently. I try not to do this judgmentally or with anything remotely approaching scare tactics. I certainly don't want to set up negative predictions for the males, nor do I want to over reassure the females about their own probabilities for greater academic success and potential for degree attainment. I guess what I want to do most are several things:

1. get students reflecting on how their own school experiences to date may have yielded different experiences for the genders
2. asking what are the cultural influences that suggest models for male vs female behaviors—not only in educational settings but in the larger society
3. picking generic categories of the student experience and asking them to reflect on how men and women might chose to behave similarly or differently faced with the same responsibilities or challenges.

I find that students do want to talk about this. They are thinking about this. The women have observed that they are doing better in school and while they accrue advantages from this they are concerned about what this may indicate about male potential. The women are also concerned about this because of the implications for their social lives, and ultimate mate selection. On a very fundamental level: what am I going to talk to these guys about? Actually, I find women to be much more concerned about this than young men of college entrance traditional age.

In my own work with students on this topic I have decided that the most productive routes of thinking and discussion have to come down to getting them to think about:

1. What are the behavioral choices that I make every day that determine my success, or lack of it, and the quality of my daily life experience?
2. How do I feel about those choices? Are they working for me the way I want them to?
3. How are my choices influenced by the norms of the groups of which I am a member?
4. What are the consequences of my choices, particularly when combined with the broader patterns of my choices?
5. How similar am I to the people with whom I associate, and their choices?
6. Do I really want to be like these people?
7. How much in control of these choices am I allowing myself to be?

Where I am going with all this is to get them to conclude, as I finally did in my own development, that "if it is to be, it is up to me."

On the Way to War with Teddy Bear and Memories of Mother

10-10-11

During the week of the eleventh anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan, I had my own experience that moving brought home to me what this war is all about. It happened in my local airport, in Asheville, North Carolina.

As you know, airports are happy places and they are sad places—and often juxtaposed and simultaneously so. The occasion for this posting was an absolutely wrenching farewell between a young 40-ish mother and her late teens, very early 20's daughter. Before they embraced for what seemed to be, understandably so, forever, and the mother could no longer restrain herself from sobbing, I had heard them talking about the daughter's departure for Afghanistan. The younger was "in uniform", all except for what I couldn't take my eyes off: a pink teddy bear stuffed animal strapped to the outside of her backpack. I just can't get this image out of my mind.

Some years ago we started something at the University of South Carolina known as "Move In Day" to be accompanied by the "Faculty/Staff Moving Crew". It invariably was the hottest day in August. I volunteered for the event every year when faculty and staff in large numbers turned out to help the students move in, carry things to the rooms. Because of both my seniority and a weak back, I was assigned to staffing the cool aid stand.

I remember often seeing these very mature, in some respects, female students lugging their worldly goods in with the helicopter parents. You can easily imagine all the paraphernalia. Almost all of the females had their stuffed animals which was about the only differentiating item I could see which separated them from the males. I would often think of those stuffed animals as a poignant reminder of how both mature, and immature, sophisticated, and still childlike these students were. It was good for me to be reminded of that duality and ambiguity as I would be teaching them a few days later.

But I never thought of these young women taking those little bears to war. It is old men like me that send not only young men, but young women to war—and the latter with their teddy bears. This wasn't like my own Vietnam era military experience.

I think I will never forget the young woman I saw this morning and how she spoke to me, without speaking to me.

Inspired by Andy Rooney: What Do You See Your Role in Life to Be?

10-12-11

Like millions of Americans I watched transfixed as I listened to Andy Rooney doing his final and farewell commentary to and for so many of us. I am so glad I watched. I was moved. If you didn't see this, well, you really should check out CBS for the text of his piece.

I don't know when I have heard such an explicit and poignant statement of what a life is or could be all about. And how one's life relates to vocation. This would be great to play or assign for beginning college students say in a first-year seminar session on career planning. This man really knows what his life has been all about, what has been his purpose, what have been his sources of gratification. And purpose is so important to all of us no matter what stage of life we are in.

Andy's piece reminded me of a series we used to offer at USC through our University 101 program, the so-called "Last Lecture Series". Of course, this idea is not unique at all to my University. But I have no idea if the concept is still in vogue, let alone use anywhere. Idea is very simple: you ask an educator(s) to give his "last lecture." What would you most want to say to students? What would you want them most to remember, to take away from their experience with you? I remember a beautiful one where one of our most distinguished piano faculty, John Kenneth Adams, performed his last lecture by playing a work of Debussy, to which he added his own verbal commentary.

Anyway, Andy just gave his last lecture. I didn't need it to have clarity about my own purpose and life's intent and meaning, but it surely did move me nevertheless. I found him to be the kind of thoughtful, intentionally wise "elder" that I think our students should be exposed to.

And while you are at it, why don't you give consideration to having your own "last lecture" series and/or delivering one personally. Just the act of deciding what you would say could be worth the investment in the exercise.

Moneyball? What Role Loyalty (versus money)?

10-17-11

I was out for dinner and a movie this past Saturday night, with two very smart women, one of whom is my wife, Betsy Barefoot. They selected the movie and we went to see Moneyball, with Brad Pitt. I didn't look at him like they did but I noted that he reminded me of graceful aging and taking on some resemblance to Robert Redford. But I didn't come away from the film primarily thinking about the lead actor. Instead, I found myself focusing on what is the role of "loyalty" to the concept of "team" in today's world, for which major league revenue sports is such a grand metaphor.

As most of my readers will probably know, this movie is really about the need to challenge one's cherished assumptions about how your "game" really works. In this case the "game" is professional baseball, and in particular, the Oakland Athletics in the early 21st century—how they moved out of the cellar and accomplished an historic winning streak.

I did get caught up in the story line and the drama. But what really stayed with me was my thoughts about the players who can be bought, sold, traded, moved up or "sent down" at any time. They appeared to have absolutely no certainty, and no control over their own fates. And they were moved around incessantly by the protagonist, the manager Billy Beane, played by Robert Redford.

So I found myself asking: what motivates these guys? Money? In this kind of a culture how could you possibly generate loyalty to the team? So what else would motivate them?

I must admit, I have told students what they have to do in the era of the fast economy is to learn a body of knowledge and skills that makes them both unique and perpetually marketable. I know I cannot tell them what my father told me: "Son, find a good company and stick with it." Actually, I am a paradox for I really did both. I learned a body of information, knowledge, wisdom, coupled with my skills, which combined to give me value in an information based economy—and value no longer tied to any one employer. Yet I had one employer for 32.5 years and was very loyal. And my loyalty was a very powerful motivator, significantly more so than my compensation. A few years ago I actually had a work colleague tell me that I was still so fixated on loyalty that "you would have made a great manager in the 50's." Actually, I became a higher ed manager in the mid 70's, and have remained one to this day, still trying to act like he is in the 50's. But back to Moneyball.

Moneyball made me think about how this film must speak to traditional aged college students, thinking about pursuing careers for money, not loyalty, while being completely dispensable to their employing organizations. And some of our students don't like this prospect, which is why some of them are joining the OCCUPY Wall Street movement. I'm betting that this protest movement just might make a difference. It is certainly speaking to me, even though by the standard of capitalism I have it made.

What's A One Liner Your Students Might Remember and Be Influenced By? 10-26-11

The other day I had just come through a TSA screening line in Indianapolis and a TSA agent came up to me and handed me a bucket full of change that I had neglected to reclaim. The dialogue that ensued went something like this:

John: Well, another honest TSA Agent! Thank you very much.

Agent: Yes, sir. My mother taught me "never take anything that isn't yours." She told me that again and again and again.

John: Oh, yes, I understand. My mother's voice is still alive and well in my head. She speaks to me there every day.

Agent: One day I handed a man \$5000 he had left in the bucket in his wallet.

John: You certainly must sleep well at night. What America needs are more citizens like you (unlike the unregulated/deregulated Wall Street financiers who stole from all of us I thought but didn't say).

Agent: Thank you Sir.

I left the exchange wondering what is it that we could say to our students "again and again" that might really sink in. What could you say that could become your mantra with students? Put it in your syllabus. Put it on your office door.

I wish I had raised the question to myself earlier in my career when I had lots of my own students. I know I had many principles which I tried to teach them, like the importance of voting, and reading a good daily newspaper. But a one liner? No, I didn't have one, except with my second son.

He is a great guy, now 36, married, has two children, a good honest, law abiding, tax paying citizen (and a college graduate). But when younger he was always trying to con me in little harmless ways. And my predictable response always was: "Son, you can't sh*t an old sh**ter." That's all I needed to say and he would revise what he had just said that prompted me to say that and instead I would get a straight forward, honest rendering of whatever the facts at hand really were.

For about 13 of my 32.5 years at USC, I had a senior colleague whom I respected greatly, who every time he saw me would say: "John, are you happy in your work today?" When I saw him coming I knew what he was going to ask me and he knew I knew what he was going to ask me. He and I also both knew what my answer would be. This is what we need more of today, more predictability in our professional and personal lives.

So what are you, my readers, going to make your signature one liner for your students? And/or your colleagues? I think we all need one.

Hmmmmmm. Now what is mine going to be?

“What, Me Marry?”

11-21-11

This is not a question I am raising at all, personally. I am married, and very, very contentedly so, I am pleased is the case and to be able to report. Instead, this is the title of a highly provocative article in the November 2011 issue of The Atlantic, by a journalist Kate Bolick. It is subtitled “In today’s economy, men are falling apart. What that means for sex and marriage.”

This excellent journalistic reportage is about the extraordinary changes we are seeing in how the genders are faring in our contemporary society which is increasingly working more favorably for the highly educated and skilled, which means women more than men. I strongly recommend this piece to my readers. The title of her article conveys her thesis that as women become better educated than men, more employable than men, more likely to retain their jobs during recessions than men, earning more money than men, and able to have sex and have and raise children all without benefit of marriage, well then, why marry? Very good question.

And, as many of our students are struggling to sort out how they are going to live in a society of vastly unequal opportunities and privileges (marriage being one of them), I am sure this is a question that many of your female students especially are asking. I think you/we should be talking about this.

For years I have been concerned about the increasing differences I have observed on campuses in terms of the different ways men vs. women, literally, go to college, do college. I have been troubled not only about what I have seen but my inability to arouse much concern about this. This even starts at home. When I bring this up to my very well educated and usually sympathetic to my causes wife, I get no sympathy. Her view is that men still run the country and aren’t doing a very good job of it and don’t need any sympathy from her.

My concerns have been about such factors as these:

1. Men are less likely to go to college
2. When they do go to college they are less likely to be retained and graduate
3. They are less likely to seek assistance
4. They study less than women
5. They enter and exit college with higher self esteem
6. They are more likely to be involved in dysfunctional behaviors ranging from alcohol and drug abuse to vandalism of institutional property
7. They are less likely to engage in community service
8. They are less likely to be engaged in leadership roles in campus activities

And this is nothing new. We have been watching this take shape over the past three decades. One of the reasons the alarm bells aren’t really ringing has to be because the majority of campuses are still run primarily by men, and they just either don’t want to see this problem or deal with it if they do. Or if they do attempt to deal with it they fear they will be beaten up by feminist colleagues who will argue no sympathy for the group which is still the dominant group.

If I were still teaching a first-year seminar, I would definitely assign this article to my students. The implications from the declining societal opportunities for men have profound implications for how male and female students are relating to each other on campuses these days. We educators need to understand this better. I think that many of our students already understand this better than we do, in part, because it is having such profound effects on their social lives.

As a gross example of this, I was told this summer by an articulate cab driver in a US resort city, where there is a public regional college with a 70/30 female/male student ratio, that his best and politest customers were female college students—whom he said he liveried around on weekends as they sought out the professional services of male gigolos due to the scarcity of available males on campus. That certainly doesn’t sound like social life on campus as I once knew it. In fact, it gives a whole new meaning to the descriptor of “BMOC”, “Big Man on Campus.”

Inequality Sinking In

11-2-11

This posting is written during a period when there have been a spate of press reports shedding light on what many of us academics have known for a long time: the US is a country of profoundly increasing inequality which part of our government seems most willing to maintain, and another part might want to reverse this but doesn't seem to know how. All these related trends of rising inequality, the shrinking of the middle class, reductions in upward social mobility, the reality being a mockery of the American dream, surely have to be making our students ask some questions.

What could some of those questions be?

1. Why am I in college if I may not get a decent job as a result of my obtaining a college degree?
2. What is the possibility of my having a higher standard of living than my parents?
3. How am I ever going to repay all this student loan debt that I am acquiring?
4. Why would I want to marry someone and take on his/her student loan debt?
5. How am I ever going to come up with the down payment on a home with all the student loan obligation?
6. How can I ever afford to have and support a child when I have such an uncertain economic future and so much debt already?
7. This may mean moving back in with mom and dad. Is that what I am going to college for?
8. So other than a job and making good money, what could I be learning about in college that might help me live my life in other ways?
9. Are there things in college worth learning about that might provide more meaning and enjoyment for my life than simply job training?
10. What is this Occupy Wall Street movement all about? Do those people have a point? What is their point? Do they speak for me?
11. Who is this country working well for now if not for people like me?
12. Do any of my elected leaders and especially any of the Republican presidential candidates making so many pronouncements this fall seem to care about the issues that concern me?
13. What should we college students be concerned about right now any way?
14. What can we college students do about any of these challenges to our American way of life?

What are the questions your students are asking? How do you engage them on these? How do you connect the content of your discipline to what is on their minds this fall? If you/we aren't talking to them, then we are joining most of our elected leaders in not talking to them either.

Fall: That Special Season for Beginnings and Endings

11-7-11

Last week was Halloween for the external culture and for the internal higher ed culture: it was midterms. When I started college it was 13 years before the Buckley Amendment to the Privacy Act. Those were the halcyon days for college officials who could and did send home midterm grades to parents of students like me. This was a motivational strategy. And my first grades were terrible: 3 F's, 2D's, and 1A (physical ed — I was a varsity athlete). When my advisor personally handed my mid-term grade to me he told me: "Gardner, you are the stupidest kid I have ever advised!" I didn't know what I was going to do about those grades but I knew I had to do something about getting another advisor. Which I did. My old advisor went on to become a college president in Texas. My new one got me through college. I owe him a great deal, and I told him so repeatedly before he died.

But both pre and post that modification of the Privacy Act, this has always been a special period for college students to focus on beginnings and endings.

It seems that for most of my life, I have been "beginning" something in the fall: when I started nursery school, K-12, college, graduate school.

I was inducted into the US Air Force in an October.

And sometimes ending something in the fall: I finished my Air Force tour of duty (as a psychiatric social worker) in an October.

I started my full-time college teaching career in fall. And I started at the University of South Carolina which was my true career shaper and shaker, in the fall.

And I started with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, our current non-profit higher ed "corporation" in October of 1999.

And that fall was also when I started living in my adopted state of North Carolina.

So my outdoor hikes in the mountains of western North Carolina on the weekends, especially in October, are a perfect period for my reflections on beginnings and endings. I am privileged to be a member of a profession that keeps getting to begin again and again, every fall and at other times too.

The fall is also a time when our students realize what they have lost, left behind, what has died (their former lives) and what Humpty Dumpty cannot put together again.

Some years ago I met at one of our First-Year Experience conferences a psychology professor from The Defiance College (OH), Dr. Davina Brown. As she let her story unfold in her session which I attended, I learned that for a number of years she had worked in a large, urban, hospital, where she had done pastoral, clinical counseling with patients and their families. As she related it, that meant dealing with people who were grieving. After a sufficient time at this she decided to leave this context for her practice and sought a more "normal" population to work with—which she thought would be traditional aged college students who would not be into grieving. Wrong. Think again.

So she took a job on the faculty at this college which had a first-year seminar which required the students to keep a journal. Because she was a new and untenured faculty member she was required to teach this course. She told us how it didn't take reading the journal entries for too many weeks to realize she was seeing shades of what she left behind in the Cleveland hospital:

Inspiration from Private Enterprise

11-9-11

Earlier this year I happened to comment in a presentation that I was about to depart with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, for a two week vacation out of the United States and that I would be taking a vacation also from my blogging. In response to my reporting such a member of the audience admonished me not to stop blogging during this period. Feeling both complimented and chastised, I agreed to keep checking in with a few postings. Once I did this and arrived in my countries of destination (Australia and New Zealand) I realized that I had an obligation to keep writing and therefore I began to imagine myself as a reporter. Now with that as a context, my wife and I have just left the US again on a short, 10 day vacation, this time to Italy. And I am again reminded that I need to act as a reporter.

So, from that perspective, when we arrived for the first time ever in Italy, in the business and fashion capital of the country, Milan, we checked into a Hyatt Hotel. My experience with such chain hotels in the US did not prepare me for my check in experience in Italy. After duly registering, providing passports for copying, etc, and completing the registration process, the desk agent who checked us in announced that she would now show us to our room. And to my acculturated amazement, she escorted us to an elevator, to our room, and demonstrated all the features of the room. After she departed and left us to our own devices, I just couldn't get the check in experience out of my mind.

So what is the moral of this story? Well, it is, it would appear that sometimes the good old free enterprise system knows how to make new arrivals feel more welcome than we do in the academy. And another moral of the story is that first impressions of the arrival in a new land are lasting and therefore terribly important. And another one is that the check in experience can totally redefine how the participant views the organization providing the check in. And still another one is that when an employee of the organization steps beyond the boundaries of what you assume are the normal parameters of services to be provided, it can and does leave an enormously favorable impression.

So what if the next time we provided a student with some basic form of information, perhaps a referral, and then instead of leaving it at that, we literally walked the student through the next steps, really extended ourselves, did more than we had to? I predict that the impact could be far greater on the student than it was demanding of us in terms of the time and energy we invested.

So think about it: how can you improve your "check in" of students when they arrive for the first time on your doorstep seeking some kind of assistance?

I am not saying "run your college/university like a business. That is not the mantra I aspire to. But I am asking what we can learn and perhaps emulate from those parties we observe who are the best at making students feel noticed, welcomed, significant and who are especially good at going that beyond expectations extra step that has such a lasting impression.

Veteran's Day 2011

11-14-11

I am glad I am a "Vet". That term is, of course, culturally defined in the US to describe someone who has served in the US military. I am proud to know and say I did and was honorably discharged in 1968 after a tour in the US Air Force which sent me to South Carolina and also introduced me to my career with the University of South Carolina.

In my non-profit organization, we celebrate and recognize Veteran's Day as it is now called (as opposed to our original name – "Armistice Day" which signified the signing of the armistice which brought the killing to a halt in World War I on November 11, 1918—even though technically I am the only "veteran" in the organization. But without that experience there would be no such organization as it was the military which brought me this career.

I am glad I am a veteran because of all that I learned and experienced and especially because of the service(s) I performed. My duties were as a psychiatric social worker in an Air Force hospital. Much as I was opposed to the Vietnam War and did not want to support it, support it I did. I was one of the millions of little human cogs that kept the wheel turning. In my case, I helped keep the war machine operating—my part of it being the unarmed reconnaissance planes that flew over North and South Vietnam taking the pictures which were used to plot the bombing runs—by helping to keep the troops and their dependents functioning. And that I did.

This was also great experience in dealing with anxiety and depressive disorders, character and behavior personality disorders and sexual deviancies, that laid such a useful "foundation" for my subsequent work in the academy with mostly "normal" but some not so normal people.

When I arrived at my permanent base in South Carolina, Shaw AFB, in Sumter, S.C. my squadron commander called me in for reasons I did not understand (this was on January 11, 1967). He told me that he had been reviewing my "record" and said "Gardner, you have a lot of education—more than anyone in the Squadron except for the physicians." This means that we (the Air Force) want and expect you to perform some "service." I responded "yes sir" but did not understand what he meant by "service." I was less than a month short of my 23rd birthday and no one had ever told me I was expected to perform "service." I asked him for an explanation and he offered that he meant "teaching" and told me the base was "desperate" for qualified adjunct instructors to teach in the on-base college program sponsored by the University of South Carolina. So he had the Base Education Office arrange a visit for me two days later, on a Saturday because there were still Saturday classes at USC, to have my credentials reviewed. I was approved to teach six different courses, five in History and one in Sociology. And for the next several years I taught as many as five nights a week and Saturday mornings. I loved it and decided to make that my career after discharge. I am so thankful to the Air Force.

Moral of the story: how many of my readers ever say to their students "I want you to perform some service"? And if you did say it, what would you mean? What options would you give them?

Of course, the draft has long ended. Now we have only the "volunteer army" and entice the poor of our country to go and give their "all" as a form of last resort employment in a society that offers them few other opportunities.

I think that many college students would benefit from some kind of mandatory national service-as I did. What did I learn?

I learned the intrinsic value of performing service, and of its great satisfaction.

Reflections from Italy

11-16-11

I have been in Italy for 5 days now. I do not bring good luck to countries when I travel. I was in France on 9/11. Was in Christ Church New Zealand the morning of the great earthquake. And this week I have been in Italy with my wife, Betsy Barefoot and they have had terrible floods and their political leader has been forced to announce a plan for his resignation.

We had a wonderful guide in Florence, a late 40's or so guy with a son who had just graduated from University. The guide told me what I had been reading about already, namely, that the Italian unemployment rate for recent college graduates is running about 30 percent (much worse than in the US). And I know thanks to one of our political parties that is doing everything possible to make the economy worse in order to defeat President Obama, that the prospects for appropriate jobs for our college graduates is going to get a lot worse. As I have written before, when I graduated, I had only a very few options for life after college: work for a defense contractor, seminary, marriage, or war. I got drafted and so the choice was made for me. And then I had to make the most of it. And I did. But given our employment prospects for our college grads, we better be teaching them in college more than what to do to earn a living. We better be teaching them to find meaning outside employment.

I met a server in a restaurant who was from Albania. Had been in Italy for 13 years, except for one year when he went to Phoenix and worked for Marriott. Can't wait til he returns to the States. Sees us as the land where anyone can work his way up, pay little or no taxes, be free of intrusive government regulations and where the notion of upward social mobility for those who take risks and work hard is alive and well. I thought: "hey, is this the country I know?" All the data that I am reading suggests upward social mobility is now greatly constrained. And our lack of regulations brought on the great financial collapse of 2008. Interesting how long we hang on to our myths and that it takes for reality to catch up with and revise stereotypes. This applies to how long it took me to finally buy an American made car (in December 2008) which meant getting over my perception that Detroit couldn't build a quality automobile. It can and I am delighted with my American made car.

But the big story in the week I am away is what is going on at Penn State. I have long viewed the ultimate measure of quality of life in any country to be the concern that is extended to the welfare of its children. So here is a story where people in power had reason to believe that someone else in a position of power may have been molesting children. By the standards of post industrial societies and western democracies the US doesn't rank well in terms of its care for the least powerful: our children—witness the dramatic rise in the number living in poverty. As I drove from Siena to Spoleto in Italy today I commented to my wife that since we had been in this country we had seen no overt signs of poverty anywhere, no matter what they are paying for interest on their bonds. Yet, paradoxically, this is the country that has given the world the largest and most powerful organization that protects adults who molest children. As I think about all my friends back home that adore their alma mater or their employer, Penn State, one of the top 32 public research universities in the country, all I know is that the institution somehow failed to pass what for me is the ultimate litmus test of a civilized society: protecting children, the least powerful, first. There is much I do not know about this sad set of circumstances, but it does appear that there were other considerations than children first. In that respect, Penn State is an allegory of the larger host country—both the one where I am a citizen, and the one where I am a guest.

Since I have been away, I have read a report submitted to me by one of our Foundations of Excellence participating institutions. The report was on how the institution was, or was not, measuring up to a standard of excellence for diversity. And I got the usual pablum that I find in American colleges and universities that "diversity" can and must be addressed by "programming" and by special sessions in orientation and bolt on components in first-year seminar courses.

Thanksgiving 2011

11-23-11

It is Thanksgiving season for another year and so I suppose I should reflect on Thanksgiving from the perspective of my life in the academy, and from its place in the current context of our society.

I have been in my profession 44 years. And I am thankful to say that if I could do it all over again, I certainly would have:

- chosen the same vocation
- chosen to practice it where I could do educational missionary work (the American South)
- integrated my practice of education with the larger cause of social justice
- focused on low status people—both the kinds of students and educators that serve them that are very often marginalized by both society and even the academy

Thanksgiving this year comes in the larger context of a period when we have seen:

- Our Congress reach new levels of dysfunctionality and the American public perception of the effectiveness of its government reach all time lows
- The creditworthiness of our country be downgraded for this first time
- The rebirth of student activism at levels not seen since the early 1970's as in the Occupy Wall Street movement
- The revelation of what has become the most sensational scandal involving a university athletic program, one in which there may have been intentional ignoring and cover up of sexual abuse of children by university employees
- Unprecedented levels of public rationalization for greed on behalf of the wealthiest Americans
- A national consciousness raising of the vast declines in standards of living, the size of the middle class, opportunities for upward social mobility coupled with the notion that we are a country of 99% and 1% in terms of access to and possession of means, power, opportunity, privilege.

So what am I thankful for?

I am thankful:

- that I get the privilege to work with such hopeful, ambitious, energetic, creative, high energy students
- and that I get the same kind of privilege to work with higher educators who really do care about serving students and seeing them improve their lots in life
- that my work environment is one of academic freedom, coupled with a high degree of personal autonomy
- that my occupation is still respected by the larger public
- that I am in an "industry" that is in more demand than ever by the public
- that my "industry's" culture, while increasingly becoming corporatized, is still significantly different from that of the for-profit corporate sector and therefore more focused on human values than monetary ones
- that my work has redeeming social value and adds value to the lives of both students and educators
- that my work is personally gratifying
- that my work enables me to enjoy a decent standard of living in a society where that standard is declining for the majority of my fellow citizens

I could go on. By being a practicing member of the academy I think we still have much to be thankful for, even on our worst days. And I think if we were more intentional about being aware of what we have to be thankful

for as higher educators that that attitude might carry over to the students whom we are charged to serve—they deserve that. And we might feel better too.

I hope you had a satisfying Thanksgiving.

Remembering the Power of Mentoring

11-30-11

So often in life we have no idea what is going on simultaneously with whatever we may be experiencing on any given day. The day after Thanksgiving is such a moment for me. On that day I drove down from my home in Brevard, North Carolina, with my wife and sister, to visit my two sons and their families, in Lexington, South Carolina, my home county for 30 years when I worked for the University of South Carolina. A lovely day was had by all. But the next day I learned that on the day before one of my most powerful mentors had died, also in the central South Carolina environs, while I was having a most relaxing day just a few miles away.

I refer to my academic dean for the period 1972-1983, when I rose through the ranks from a brand new Assistant Professor to full Professor. It was also during this period when my Dean unselfishly agreed to release me 50% time to take on my career changing role of Director of University 101. My Dean was Harry E. "Sid" Varney, and I owe much of my subsequent career success to him and his great influence on my development. So I have spent the rest of Thanksgiving weekend thinking about the power of mentoring, and his mentoring in particular. Those of us now in positions of power need to remind ourselves every day of the obligation to mentor others—every day, every opportunity.

In my case, I worked with and for this dean for the period when I was ages 28-39. My career could have gone any number of directions. I know that I was consciously looking for mentors. I will use this blog to record some of his influences, my recollections of what he taught me, that I have carried on in my own career.

- Sid was fond of saying "John, you missed a perfect opportunity to keep your mouth shut", but he never attempted to make me shut it before opening. Now I try to treat everyone who works for me as if they had tenure, even though they don't.
- Sid had not a trace of the pompous pretentiousness that some of us academics display to and about others who are less educated—which means most of the population that happen to pay our salaries.
- Sid had far greater respect than I did for intercollegiate athletics and saw it as a powerful track for upward social mobility for the nation's poor. His life had personified this as he moved from an inauspicious background in Pennsylvania lacking in privilege to an All-American high achieving athlete status at UNC Chapel Hill in not one but two sports: football and baseball, in the late 1940's.
- Sid had almost an equal sympathy for the children of the privileged who struggled to live up to their parents' expectations that they achieve on equal levels. So for years he ran a kind of shadow advising center for many of the children of the state's elite. And many of these kids ended up getting assigned to his most sympathetic faculty, people like me, also a child of the privileged.
- Sid taught me the power of quiet practice of a political value set, speaking rarely in public about his own politics, a closet liberal, if there ever was one. He didn't wear his liberalism on his sleeves as I did (and do), but he was one of only a handful of voters I knew who would admit he voted for George McGovern in 1972. He was able to work with a much broader range of South Carolina leaders than I was by staying under the radar.
- Unlike the guy whom pundits are predicting will become the Republican nominee for the Presidency this year, Sid not only had no hair, he had a consistent ideology and philosophy for his work and life. Every day. And it never changed. There was not a hint of opportunism or "idea du jour" in this man. Every day he had one mantra: do what is best for the little guy, the less powerful, privileged and educated; do what is best for the people who pay our salaries; do what is best for the people of South Carolina; the University is theirs not ours; what matters most is using the University to extend educational opportunity to as many people as possible.
- I had never encountered anybody who seemed to derive such great pleasure from helping advance others, his former football players, students, colleagues, employees, and, of course, his wife and two sons. I observed him on countless occasions doing something to help somebody get a job. I had never seen anybody before, or since, have so much fun helping people get jobs. He deeply understood what today's right wingers do not: the importance of jobs for all. That all work lends dignity. That most people

don't want handouts. They just want meaningful work. That the role of government (e.g. public universities) is to enhance employment opportunities and literally to do everything possible to help their students get jobs. I never saw any other higher educator work harder to get people jobs.

- And when he wasn't helping somebody get a job, he was helping somebody get awarded, rewarded, promoted, paid more money, advanced, in a myriad of other socially redeeming ways, all legal. I watched carefully and absorbed the enormous gratification I saw he derived from advancing others. And today it is definitely one of my greatest pleasures.
- Sid never wanted anyone else working for him that someone else wouldn't want working for them. So when it came time to move on, I saw him treat others as he would have wanted to be treated himself. He would help them move on even if it cost him and his unit dearly. When it came to his choosing what was best for his unit or his employees' individual careers, he always chose what was best for them. I had never seen before such unselfishness.
- The man was a master of affirmation. He always had the time to give others a stroke, and usually in a short, personal, handwritten note. This is particularly lacking now in the era of e-mail communication, let alone texting.
- He taught me: "John, praise in public, and criticize in private."
- He took me out behind the woodshed one day because he learned I sent one of his fellow deans a memorandum on which I had not copied him. I had committed a cardinal sin: I had failed to keep my boss informed about communications I was having with his peers. I never made that mistake again.
- Sid was always teaching me, for better or worse. He didn't have to work at it. It was just who he was. He was my mentor, 24/7. And long after I moved on from his employ, he kept reaching out to me, letting me know he was following my career with respect and support. The job of a mentor is never done. Mentees never outgrow their need for mentoring.

I learned from Sid that the rest of my life should be spent in repaying the gift.

Rethinking the Value of Coaching and Athletics

12-7-11

Earlier this week I wrote a blog posting about the death of one of my first mentors in my higher education career. This posting is about his funeral and the reflections it engendered on my part—these have ramifications beyond myself.

At this funeral for Harry E “Sid” Varney, were gathered his family, his former football team mentees, and his former colleagues from the University of South Carolina. It was his former football players that had the impact on me.

The deceased had just finished a life of 83 years. In his mid 20’s, about sixty years before, he had coached a football team for five years, from 1953-58, at Elon College, now Elon University. And from that team approximately 12 former players came to the funeral in Columbia, S.C. from their homes largely in North Carolina, but also New Jersey, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Each of them gave a eulogy of varying lengths to describe my former mentor and his impact on them.

It was obvious to me that there were common themes for all:

- this was the person who was most responsible for them going to college in the first place—he recruited them
- this was the person most responsible for them staying in college no matter what adversities they faced
- this was the person who was most influential on the subsequent course of their adult lives
- this mentoring experience he provided was so powerful sixty years ago that each could recall it as vividly as a traditional aged college student who had just walked across the stage
- these men still had a manner of thinking, valuing, speaking, literally standing, that emulated the deceased
- for each student playing, college football was the only means of upward social mobility available to them

And, so I reflected:

- sixty years later the influence of money in collegiate sports has reached a level unimaginable in the era these men were speaking of and from; is the same value from his era still operative?
- now thank goodness, there are other means for upward social mobility
- will Division I football players currently on the field be able to look back on their college experience the same way these men were able to?
- are my own attitudes towards the role of college athletics too critical, intolerant?
- do we need to provide more college students with “coaches”?
- how can we help college professors who are more likely than any other type of college employee behave more like coaches without compromising the intellectual integrity of their work?
- was the impact of my college varsity sport coach (crew) as great as what I observed this week? Yes, almost. And I am different today because of it—the subject of another blog.

Critical Junctures: A Way of Thinking about Where We Need to Intervene to Support Students

12-7-11

I wish I could have any denomination of money for every time I have been asked “what is the most important reason or cause for student attrition?” Of course, I usually waffle like a politician, but an academic one, and quibble about the intellectual legitimacy of the idea of a “most important” cause. But clearly attrition is related to those aspects of the college experience around which our students get in trouble, can’t handle, etc.

Recently, my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I did a workshop in which we decided to approach this matter of understanding student attrition from the perspective of what we called “critical junctures.” We defined “critical junctures” as “particular events or decision points that occur throughout the undergraduate years” and as “potential bumps in the road your students experience.” We asked the group to consider our suggested notions of critical junctures and then come back to us with their own, what had we missed, and what did they think should be added to this list. The idea was to get them thinking about how to address the challenges of enhancing student retention around designing intentional forms of support and intervention around these critical junctures.

This approach is also based on the assumption that these critical junctures are:

- predictable
- common to large numbers of students
- academic*personal/social

And these are the critical junctures we posed to them:

First, the ACADEMIC...

- being at a “second choice” institution
- initial placement examinations
- moving in and out of developmental education courses and/or ESL curricula
- succeeding in gateway courses
- the overall “first-year experience”
- declaring or changing a major
- being forced to seek alternatives to a “first choice” major
- reacting to being on “provisional” admissions status
- moving on and/or off academic probation/suspension
- moving from full-time to part-time status (and vice versa)
- progression exams
- transfer—intra institutionally
- transfer—inter institutionally
- graduate school entrance exams
- the senior year experience
- graduation

And now the SOCIAL critical junctures...

- affiliation with social groups on campus—acceptance or rejection
- elimination from an athletic team
- roommate problems
- “coming out”
- romantic breakup (including divorce—the student’s or his/her parents)
- problems at home—family issues
- financial problems—loss of employment or major financial reversal, unanticipated challenges, losing/gaining financial aid or scholarships
- stopping out
- moving from dependent to independent tax status
- moving from in-state (resident) to “non-resident” fee status

And when we opened these illustrations up to our group, here is what they added—still more critical junctures:

- the August train wreck (initial registration, class start—particularly if it is “late”
- death in the immediate family
- deployment—impact on both active duty military personnel and their dependents
- diagnosis of learning disability and then related decisions/consequences
- tuition due dates—simply “coming up with the money”
- homesickness
- life after the first year—the sophomore year experience

We offered these closing perspectives:

- critical junctures can and do overlap and then have an even greater cumulative impact
- you need to ask how is your institution organized—or not organized—to support students during these critical junctures?
- for which juncture(s) is support the strongest?
- and for which the weakest?
- at which juncture do you lose the most students?

One of the greatest challenges we have faced in our decades of working with higher educators to address the problem of student retention is how to move from the more abstract theories that help us understand this phenomena to actually being able to focus concretely on the students’ experiences. We think this concept of “critical junctures” can be useful in this applied thinking and action and commend it to you for your consideration.

For starters, use my list(s) above as a template for your own institution. What’s missing? Where do you fit in? And, by all means, don’t limit your discussion here to just fellow educators. Have students (focus groups perhaps) tell you what their critical junctures are. And further remember: every institution is different and will have some of its own unique critical junctures due to unique policies and practices that impinge on students.

One thing I know for sure: we can’t improve student retention until we get better at helping students with their critical junctures.

What Did I Learn and What Am I Going to Do with What I Learned?

12-12-11

No doubt, one of the most profoundly developmental experiences I had as a college educator was and is one that thousands of higher educators can also have today. I refer to my first faculty training workshop in which I was a participant as part of the training program my university (the University of South Carolina) created in 1972 to prepare its faculty and staff instructors to teach the now internationally replicated University 101 course. This was a workshop then (July 1972—a month after the Watergate burglary!) designed to teach faculty members like me who had had no “training” in how to be a college “teacher” a whole new set of pedagogies to improve student learning and success.

One of the pedagogies we spent a great deal of time on was called simply “facilitation”. It was a pedagogy to be both a complement to and an alternative to the traditional college lecture method. In facilitation, it is the faculty member’s responsibility to design a learning activity, conduct that activity for the students, and “facilitate” some kind of process in which the students pursue two important lines of questioning:

1. What did I learn?
2. And what am I going to do with what I learned.

This has been a practice I have used ever since that workshop, in my teaching, my administrative work, and in my personal life.

I have just had the occasion to practice this in my personal life. Specifically, my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I have just returned upon this writing from a fast, 10 day trip to Italy, a country we had never before visited. While I was there I found myself constantly asking “what am I learning?” “Now isn’t that just like an academic” you would rightly say—“instead of just enjoying a vacation he has to be intellectually analyzing it?” Yes, I confess, guilty as charged. But for me, the academic, a significant part of the vacation pleasure comes in and from the analysis of what I learned and my speculation about what I might do with what I learned.

So just what did I learn:

1. That Donald Rumsfeld, one of our most recent former Secretaries of Defense, was dead wrong when he mocked what he called “Old Europe” implying that we Americans had little to learn from them and that we should just go our own way. We have a great deal to learn from Old Europe.
2. In our whole time in Italy we did not meet one citizen who would acknowledge any respect for the country’s elected leader. In fact, we were literally there there at the public square where and when he made his public announcement of resignation. At least in my country there are citizens who respect our elected leader.
3. That we are not a country that has as part of its national culture the respect for “art”. It cannot be said that across our social classes we are unified by our respect and appreciation for art as a meaningful, powerful, and necessary form of human reflection, expression and inspiration.
4. That I am woefully ignorant of art myself and that I neglected the opportunity in college to study “art appreciation.” Shame on me. It’s not too late.
5. That I need to be even more of a believer than I already am of the aspirational goal that we need to make foreign study and travel part of the undergraduate experience for all.
6. That there are good reasons why my American Express card would not provide its customary car rental insurance for rentals in Italy.
7. That western Europe both in spite of its history and because of its history with respect to the role of religion is becoming more secular. Even in the citadel of the Roman Catholic church, secularism is on the rise. I cannot say that about my own country where the religious right has such an outsize influence on public policy.
8. I could see for myself why Italy has a longer life expectancy for its citizens than does my own country: they have a universal health system and their focus on the love of family, food and wine seems to produce a higher level of personal “happiness” than I see in my own country.

This is a blog. So I am supposed to provide only the condensed version of what I learned.

OK, now here’s the harder part: what am I going to do with what I learned?

1. Share some of what I learned with others.
2. Return to parts of Italy that I did not see (we visited only Milan, Florence, Siena, Assisi, Spoleto, Rome, and Pompeii)

3. Take my grandchildren for a return visit with me when they are old enough to appreciate the experience (I did not go to Europe for the first time until I was 36 years old—no study abroad for me)
4. Learn more about art history
5. Resolve to continue my effort to try to balance the continuing practice of my professional work life with taking more vacation time to travel abroad

Let me return to the pedagogy I am trying to illustrate: what did I learn and what am I going to do with what I learned? I really do recommend this not only as a pedagogy but as a way of thinking, living, and acting inside and outside one's profession.

Take a Look at Student Behavior: What Does it Tell You?

12-19-11

Like most people, I have learned a great deal from my mentors. My first mentor at the University of South Carolina was the University's 23rd President, Thomas F. Jones, the founder of the now internationally replicated and acclaimed University 101 program, which he passed on to me to run for the next 25 years (with respect, love and care). President Jones was fond of telling the story of how he came to have the idea to create this course.

The idea came out of the aftermath of a student riot in 1970 when the students, having been tear gassed by South Carolina National Guard troops, dispersed across the campus to find him in his office that beautiful May day. They proceeded to occupy his building and thoroughly trashed it. For the rest of his career he would describe this event graciously and commend the students for teaching him something, namely, in this case the fact that they were angry! The questions for him became: why were they angry, and what would he have to do to prevent them from being angry in the future? Those questions led us to reengineer how we assimilated new students into our university. As he would narrate his epiphany in this case he would always urge his audiences to go out and observe student behavior and decide what it tells us. This is a practice I continue to this day.

The greatest challenge of course is trying to see more clearly what you see every day, but may not mentally note what you see because you have become so used to it. An example for the majority of Americans now would be their seeming obliviousness to the plight of the unemployed and the homeless. We have stopped noticing the ubiquity of the "for sale" signs. We overlook the boarded up, empty stores. We mentally tune out media reports about bad economic news.

As hard as they may seem to believe, I find that when I am on campus I am constantly asking myself: What are they doing? What am I seeing? What is the meaning of what I am seeing? So you have to be alert; you have to look; you have to keep asking. I consider this a kind of scouting, as if I were a combination of anthropologist and detective and recon point. I am always on patrol.

I live in a small, western North Carolina mountain town, where there is a small college. This is a college town where I almost never see students off the campus. This makes me ask literally where are they? What are they doing? I know they aren't in class all the time. The thing that I see them doing most frequently is gathering in small groups, particularly in one place, and smoking. Yes, that's right smoking. Before I started looking at these students at this unusual campus, I never thought of smoking as a student activity. But it is. We can never know all we might want or need to know about our students. We have to keep looking and keep asking—both ourselves, and them. I have been doing this for 44 years and I am going to keep doing this for as long as I can see.

Looking for Signs of Hopefulness

12-21-11

I can't be the only one here at the end of the year who is looking for signs of hopefulness that might portend for next year. And I am given particular inspiration by what many of our students, who joined other not so ordinary citizens, have accomplished this year in the Occupy movement. Shame on us for being so ready to write them off and for criticizing them for not being clear about what it is that they want. It has seemed pretty clear to me since the beginning: a society that pays more than rhetorical lip service to equality.

I have to admit it: I am a child of the sixties. My undergraduate college years were 1961-65 and we certainly weren't protesting anything. Then I went to graduate school during which time I was drafted; then did a tour with the United States Air Force, and was honorably discharged as the decade was almost over—and was ending to tumultuous protests on hundreds of campuses around our country. These helped end the presidential administration of the man who greatly expanded the Vietnam War; and these demonstrations kept the country's attention focused on this greatly mistaken undertaking until finally we withdrew (I am reminded of that this week when President Obama finally accomplished what he told us he would do: get all the troops out of Iraq).

In the first several years after I was a civilian again, I didn't meet a protest that I didn't want to be part of. I was "active" to understate it and won't relate my full range of legal activities here. But they certainly gave me appreciation for what citizens can accomplish when they mobilize to call out against injustice.

It seems that for decades our students have been asleep. They have been so docile, most of them, putting up with anything our politicians, campus and corporate leaders wanted to dish out. But that has finally changed. And I find that hopeful.

In just a few short months they have forced to the country's attention this whole subject of equality: the myth vs. the reality. We are all thinking now in terms of the one percent vs. the ninety-nine percent.

As an educator for whom my beloved higher education has always been more about the achievement of social justice than anything else, I am ending my year hopeful. I am hopeful that we are experiencing a powerful values clarification exercise, thanks to some of our students and other citizens. I am hopeful that this will galvanize citizens at all levels, including the current Administration, both of our national government and on our campuses. I am hopeful that this will give new life to a sense of idealism that underlies the belief that all Americans are entitled to a realistic shot at achieving social and economic justice.

2012

Higher Education Innovators (Like Me) Are Made Not Born

1-4-12

This blog is prompted by fact that I am beginning to get my thoughts together for remarks I have to make with my wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, on the occasion of our being presented with an award in a month or so. This is one of these late career awards that some of us are fortunate to receive while we are in good health. This is an occasion for doing some reflection that would present an argument that what Betsy and I did wasn't really all that unique and that others can do the same kinds of things, have the same kind of impact—if—if---if----they have the institutional support to pursue the innovative ideas that they create.

Rather than go into the particulars of this actual recognition, what I want to do is lay out a few points I would like to make to argue that in my experience I have found that higher education innovators do what they do because they have been "made" and not born—into being innovative. In other words, their contributions are more likely to be explained by how others shaped and influenced them, and in my case, in particular, how the higher education institution itself enables innovation.

I had the good fortune to work for one great university for approximately 30 years. I came there as a "nobody" but left as somebody (in terms of being nationally and internationally recognized). I couldn't have done anything to effect this transition had not my university enabled me. So what did it do (as opposed to what did I do?)

- The University gave me great personal and intellectual freedom.
- And more specifically academic freedom. I was working in a very conservative region and without academic freedom I would never have been able to keep my job. I'm absolutely positive of that.
- Powerful, older, wiser leaders at the University reached out to me in my youth to mentor and encourage me.
- Mentors opened the door for me and offered me opportunities and positions I would not have obtained on my own.
- My presidents, provosts, and deans were sincerely interested themselves in what actually happened in the classroom, what professors did, pedagogical innovations, and especially in the experiences of students. They cared about more than just money, power, and prestige, both individually and institutionally.
- And they were genuinely interested in me.
- My leaders did not bash the faculty, in contrast to some administrators I have known. At my university they actually WERE the faculty (in that they either came out of the faculty and/or they still held faculty appointments). We did not have a we/they culture.
- Tenure and promotion policies were flexible enough to reward me for pursuing certain educational pathways and practices for which there were no or few precedents.
- My reporting officials allowed me to stay the course, stay focused on a line of work that initially no one knew would pay off.
- My bosses were serious when they said they wanted their faculty to pursue careers of international distinction. They provided us platforms to do our thing(s) for years and years and years (30 of them).
- My bosses always knew and supported work that was good for both the individual faculty innovator and the university.
- My bosses were willing to invest faculty development resources in younger, high potential developing faculty like me. These investments made me a great teacher. I wasn't born that way.
- My leaders were willing to let me take risks. We didn't know in advance that what I was proposing would pay off.
- We had a culture where professional staff, including business affairs, personnel, and student affairs, were also willing to invest in shaping and supporting the careers of promising faculty innovators. Those colleagues made me a much better administrator than I would have been otherwise.
- My leadership believed that we faculty had a responsibility to be members of an international community of scholars with whom we should share our work and our university. International work was highly encouraged and supported.
- My leaders always reminded me for whom I ultimately worked: the people of South Carolina, and that what I was doing better make a difference for them. And it did. And does.

- And, finally, just as I have written about as a need for first-year students, the people I worked for knew that to develop a younger innovator, you had to provide what Nevitt Sanford so aptly phrased back in the 60's as: "challenge and support."

All of these institutional qualities are replicable and will produce more educational innovators, who, in turn, will be made because they weren't born that way. For my readers who have already arrived, what they need to do now is return the gift. For my readers who are still works in progress, they need to do whatever they can to get themselves in environments like I describe above. I maintain that colleges and universities must create and sustain these kinds of cultures to initiate and sustain innovation. It just doesn't happen all on its own.

A Guiding Framework

1-5-12

Long ago I learned in my own liberal arts education that the questions are often more important than the answers. My day to day work at this point in my career is guiding colleges and universities through a set of questions that my non-profit organization calls "performance indicators". These are questions that ask task forces at the institutional level to grapple with specifically targeted questions to get at what is the institution's current level of performance vis a vis a set of aspirational standards for excellence in the beginning college experience. The overall guiding questions are: what is excellence in the beginning college experience? And what would your institution have to do to be performing at a level of excellence (as opposed say to a somewhat dumbed down question like what you you have to do to simply retain students).

Why would institutions pursue such questions? To create an action plan to improve the beginning college experience—and then to implement that plan. Most institutions don't have such a plan. That's because they simply develop "programs" and don't take the time to ask the right questions.

I trust you get this point after this introduction: I like "guiding questions". And in that vein, this weekend there was an article in the [Sunday New York Times](#) (January 1, 2012) business section entitled "[Even a Giant Can Learn to Run.](#)" The article was about the "relentless progress" of IBM over the past decade and focused especially on the leadership of the outgoing IBM President, Samuel J. Palmisano.

The article described four questions which comprise the President's "guiding framework":

1. Why would someone spend their money with you?
2. Why would somebody work for you?
3. Why would society allow you to operate in their defined geography—their country?
4. And why would somebody invest their money with you?

Let's quickly revise these questions to any campus situation at the unit or institutional level.

1. Why would (should) a student, his/her family/government spend their money with you?
2. Assuming a properly credentialed and experience higher educator had the option of asking: why would he/she want to work for you? What is so special about working for you? How are you going to develop this employee and invest in him/her?
3. Why would the marketplace, your state system or whatever system your institution may be a member of, allow you to operate in the first place? What value added do you bring? How is society somehow better off because you exist as a unit or institution?
4. And why would a donor, alum, foundation invest in you? What potential do you have to move to the next level? What might be the return on investment? How could you reward the intrinsic satisfaction of the investor?

I have long believed that great leaders, at all levels, have a "guiding framework", and the same with great colleges and universities.

I think the beginning of a new year is a great time to start out deciding or reaffirming what are your guiding questions. These are far more likely to pay off than nebulous "resolutions".

So what are your guiding questions?

Next week is my 45th anniversary of being a member of the higher education profession and surely I will write a blog about that. This reminds me of how I got started asking guiding questions and how far they have taken me.

“Feeling Overwhelmed” as Subtext for “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind”

1-9-12

I was recently in communication with a colleague who is a candidate for a senior leadership position. One of the many issues that colleagues on this particular campus are dealing with is their pervasive sense of “feeling overwhelmed.” My colleague asked me how I would respond to this. Of course I know this is very real. In a period of economic recession when millions of workers feel their only reward in an employment setting is simply keeping their jobs, with no raises, with high pressure demands for increased productivity, with an ever increasing array of technological devices impinging on every second of our formerly free consciousness, it is no wonder that people feel overwhelmed. I am reminded of what my favorite American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in the late 1840’s: “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.”

So what did I tell my friend when it was asked of me how would I respond to the question of addressing subordinates legitimate concerns of feeling overwhelmed? This was my reply:

I would want you to know that I hear this at virtually every place I visit or interact with. It is a sign of the larger culture. But I think it also masks—is a smokescreen—a metaphor for a larger set of feelings that go like this:

- We are given too much busy work to do
- We are constantly being asked to do things for which there are no discernible results and/or we are not listened to and/or the project we were working on gets ignored by the decision makers and/or there are no rewards for me personally
- The economy is so bad, there are no raises, there are no rewards for merit so why should I knock myself out

I find that there is less of this sentiment where:

- Leaders convince people their work matters
- Leaders persuade people they are being listened to
- Leaders act on the input they get from work groups and projects
- Leaders find ways to recognize and affirm people
- Leaders find ways to reward merit
- Leaders find other ways to improve morale

When people feel more satisfied and fulfilled in their work they are more willing to take on additional duties for the good of the cause. That’s your challenge: to create an overall culture of improved morale.

People always find time to do what matters most to them. They want to work very hard at things they care most about. The key is for leaders to find ways to make those alignments.

Bottom line: I don’t think it is demands for more work and more and harder work. Those are not the real issues. People would willingly do those things if other things were going right for them in the work environment. So it’s those “other things” you have got to address.

Thinking of Martin Luther King 2012

1-12-12

I don't really need an MLK Day to make me think of Dr. King. I think of him frequently for the impact he had on my own consciousness and life. I think of him in the 2012 national presidential election cycle especially in terms of the unfinished civil rights movement, and the fact that there surely would be no President Barack Obama were it not for the ultimate sacrifice of Martin Luther King.

In the summer of 1963, when King delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech on the Washington Mall, I had just finished my sophomore year in college. I didn't know that a few months later my Presidential hero, John Kennedy, was going to be murdered. That August though, I had a summer job in Hillside, New Jersey, as a steelworker, laboring in a factory making millions of beer cans, and not a drop to drink -- real torture for a red-blooded American college kid like me. On the day he made that speech, I was driving on the Garden State Parkway. I had my car radio on, and I listened to the news coverage of the demonstration and speech. As he started to speak, I knew that I was never going to hear another live speech like this again. I just couldn't believe my ears. His words and spirit touched me like no speaker I had ever heard. I rapidly became enthralled and so for my own safety I pulled over to the shoulder, shut my engine off, and took in the speech in wonderment. I hadn't yet begun to conceptualize that I would ever earn my own living as a public speaker, and even if I had, I would not have imagined ever being able to speak like that. And, of course, I can't. However, he inspires me to this day.

Just five relatively short years later, with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts adopted, and the Civil Rights movement in full swing, along with the war in Vietnam, I had been drafted and then volunteered to go on active duty. I was stationed at a US Air Force base in South Carolina (as a psychiatric social worker) in April of 1968 when Dr. King was murdered. I was scheduled to teach a class in Sociology 101 the next night in my capacity as an adjunct instructor at USC Lancaster, and I just couldn't imagine sticking with my original game plan for that class. So, I went to the base library and checked out several of Dr. King's works, and used the following class for an extended eulogy and exploration of his life and its significance. My eulogy consisted largely of readings I did for the students who sat there looking --some of them--shocked, others embarrassed and avoiding eye contact with me. The next week when I returned to teach that class the campus Dean met me before class to inform me that a "delegation" of students had come to see him to complain about my previous class describing me as a "N..... Lover." I couldn't and didn't deny it.

Fast forward, here I am, 44 years later. As I look at my own continuing work to help colleges and universities improve first-year and transfer student success, more than anything else, I see my work as part of the continuing, unfinished, civil rights movement. This has been powerfully confirmed for me in the past few months as more and more attention has been called, rightfully so, to the institutionalization of inequality in the US. Now, once again, the whole country is talking about inequality, the 99% vs. the 1%, the myth of American upward social mobility, compounded by our myth that we are a classless society with equal opportunity for all.

I know my work was needed when I was just one, lone, classroom adjunct college instructor in a small, rural, southern, textile mill town. I am far from that now in terms of my own stature but my work is needed just as much given what we know to be the powerful inequities that remain in our society that can only be corrected by education as the primary means of upward social mobility.

There are so many examples of one person making a difference. Dr. King is about as good an example as I can think of. He inspired me then. He inspires me now.

A Quaker Perspective About Says It All

1-19-12

For the past several weeks living here in western North Carolina, near the South Carolina border, the airwaves have been inundated with the South Carolina Republican Presidential primary attack ads that have perniciously polluted our consciousness. I am so glad I don't live there any more during such a period. I have been following closely the excellent [New York Times](#) coverage of the incredible things these candidates have been saying especially in their predictable race baiting comments about President Obama. I think I have heard and read it all—and not only about playing the tried and true race card, but all the commentary on the 99% vs the 1%.

But, just when I reached this point of saturation, I was reading my now home town newspaper, a little twice-a-week publication in Brevard, North Carolina, population 6000, [The Transylvania Times](#). This paper is one of the reasons I love living here. It is a vital organ of local democracy. In the January 19, 2012 issue they printed a "guest column" which reported on a motion taken at the monthly Brevard Friends meeting of The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). I am constantly looking for and devouring writing that is better than my own and the following motion certainly fits in that category. I share it with you for hopefully your appreciation and concurrence with the views expressed:

"We have listened to the concerns of the Occupy Wall Street movement with a growing sense of appreciation for its seeking to "speak truth into power," a long-time Quaker tradition. We agree that our current economic system is unsustainable, undemocratic, and unjust, and that the world's resources must go towards caring for all the people of the planet we all share, not just the privileged few. We are grateful for the movement's efforts to bring these issues to national and world attention. We are impressed that there is a desire for consensus building among the many participants, and that most of them are striving to do so in a non-violent manner, in the traditions of Jesus, Gandhi, King, and our own Quaker testimonies.

Further, we want to acknowledge that most of the participants are of the younger generation, and that it is in the youth of our nation that the fires of idealism and reform often burn the brightest, while we who are older often are willing to settle for the status quo. We thank them for their insights, their passions, and for their belief that together we can build a more just and equitable world.

We see the aims of Occupy Wall Street as being similar to the mission of our Friends Committee on National Legislation (fcnl.org).

'We seek a world free of war and the threat of war. We seek a society with equity and justice for all. We seek a community where every person's potential may be fulfilled. We seek an earth restored.'

What Would You Like Me to Blog About?

1-25-12

I am losing track of time on this but a few years ago, a former staff colleague of mine in our Institute, suggested for the first time that I do a blog. I tried ignoring her at first as in just laughing and saying “Me? You have to be kidding.” But she didn’t give up and finally I consented. OK, so now I have a blog. The challenge of course is to be disciplined about this and to keep at it.

Usually, this is no challenge for me as I always have things I am thinking about and feel I can easily share. I have a task master in our Institute who posts my blogs and makes them look better than I would alone, and she keeps nudging me when I don’t have at least one waiting to be posted. Her goal for me is two a week. I don’t always make that.

At this moment I knew I should write something and as I thought about what I should write, the phrase “Well, let’s ask the customer.” came to mind. So I am asking: “What would my readers like me to write about?” I would look forward to hearing from you with suggestions of topics.

This challenge of what to write about reminds me of a technique I learned from a former colleague of mine at the University of South Carolina, Jerry Jewler. Jerry was a distinguished professor of advertising in our school of Journalism. And he directed with me the University 101 course, for six years from 1983-99. One of his strongest passions for what he believed students needed to do in our course was to develop thinking skills. And for Jerry, the best way to do that was to develop writing skills. He saw the teaching of writing as a way of teaching thinking skills. So he made a point of emphasis with our teaching faculty for the course to provide training for people who don’t teach writing to teach writing. And now a quarter of a century later I still believe that this is one of the most important purposes of any first-year course, but especially two: the first-year writing/composition course(s) and first-year seminar.

Jerry’s favorite process for teaching instructors and then ultimately students, was to use the pedagogy of a well known scholar and teacher of writing, Peter Elbow, and in particular, his strategy known as free writing. In our University 101 Teaching Experience Workshops Jerry would use the Elbow pedagogies. First we would just have the instructors practice pure “freewriting” in which they would be asked to write anything they were thinking. This would be a form of “private” writing, not to be shared with anyone in the group.

Then he would move them to “focused” freewriting by giving them a focus or topic to direct freewriting towards. And to get them started on the focused freewriting, he would give them “triggers” or phrases and ask them to write down anything that occurred to them in response to the trigger they had just heard. We believed that we could teach academics from a broad variety of disciplines who weren’t teachers of writing to become teachers of writing to become teachers of thinking.

As I started writing this blog, I already had a topic. The topic was to ask my readers what they would like me to write about. But that reminded me of another topic, of something I believe in, of a special memory and appreciation for a former very close working colleague. And this connects to my current work. I still think that first-year seminars need to be courses to teach students how to think in college, and that writing is a powerful pedagogy to achieve that end. And, yes, Jerry Jewler’s and Peter Elbow’s beliefs and pedagogies can still help at that.

Perhaps my thinking about this was stimulated by recent discussion of so many American school children no longer receiving instruction in cursive writing and all moving towards learning to write on iPads. And I am sure I am influenced by my daily distress in observing what’s happening to writing as practiced now on smart phones, and e-mail too. For any writer, myself included, there are so many powerful connections between our ideas, concerns, what we write, and for whom.

Social Justice Redux

2-6-12

One of the realizations you have as a result of international travel is that you don't realize at the time of the travel what is really going to stay with you in terms of impact. Case in point: my wife and I visited South Africa a year ago last month. While we were there we heard, literally, the repeated use of a phrase we rarely hear any more in our country: "social justice." It really resonated.

Upon our return this past year, I have found myself repeatedly using that phrase to put in context the work that I am still focused on some 45 years after beginning my career as a higher educator. I started that career 3 years after the Civil Rights Act when higher education in South Carolina, where I was involuntarily stationed in the US Air Force, was just beginning to expand and provide opportunity for all its citizens.

To fast forward to the US Presidential election of 2012 with our attention having been captured by the Occupy Wall Street movement's focus on the growth of inequality in the US, I have found myself returning again and again to this theme of social justice. Most of the people I meet now at professional conferences who are engaged in my work on "the first-year experience" or "Foundations of Excellence" have no idea that these initiatives are outgrowths of the social justice themes of US history. And frequently after I give a talk and reference the social justice foundation, it never fails that several people will come up to me and thank me for uttering these words most leaders never use any more.

I wish more of us would talk this way. Then we might be more likely to behave accordingly.

A Day with Student Affairs Leaders 2-13-12

Recently I spent a day with about 40 senior student affairs offices of the great City University of New York system. It was a great day for me, surely more so for me than for them. I was reminded of all I don't know about students and how much professors like me need to spend time with our student affairs colleagues.

The day also recalled for me the beginnings of my own journey of transformation as a faculty member. That began in 1972 when my President at the University of South Carolina invited me and 16 other faculty members to spend 45 hours over three weeks in workshop sessions with 8 student affairs officers. We had come together to design the University 101 course and to transform the beginning university experience: to do that we had to transform ourselves.

Prior to this workshop (when I was 28 years old and had been teaching in the academy for almost 6 years) I had never worked with student affairs professionals. I didn't know who they were, what they did, how they became a member of their profession. I had gone to a small liberal arts college in the 60's and that genre didn't have student affairs professionals then. Thank goodness it does now (and I am in touch with those folks now at my alma mater).

So 40 years later, déjà vu, I got to spend a day with a group of contemporary student affairs officers. Unlike my original period of introduction to them, they aren't under the radar any longer. They have been discovered and found to be incredibly important to our overall goals of increasing student success. But in that respect, they have also become victims of their own success. Now that they have been discovered many academics like me no longer understand or support the rationale of having student affairs professionals bureaucratically separated from academic affairs folks. Hence all over the country I am seeing these distinctions blur, become ambiguous and realigned, and I welcome this overdo direction because it bodes well for greater concentration on support for the preeminent institutional mission: academic success.

As I listened to these professionals who live and work in one of the most dynamic, high pressure, diverse, adversarial, confrontational cultures in the world, I marveled at how deeply and respectfully they understand their students and advocate for them. I listened to them talking about student conditions involving: courage, shame, struggles, homelessness, hunger, violence, ambition, hopes, dreams, fears, accomplishments and frustrations. I don't know when I had mentally run such a gamut in such a short period of time. I couldn't help but think that far more faculty needed to be in that room and in rooms like it. It is not that we don't know our students. We do. And many of us do engage their lives outside the classrooms. But the academic world has changed. Now the distinction between learning inside and outside the classroom has been reduced to very little difference. We can only arbitrarily separate the two, and to promote student success we must not.

I offered these professional champions for student needs a number of strategies to enhance student affairs/academic affairs collaborations. I believe they are needed more than ever. This is because the overall goal of the student success movement, social justice, is more challenged than ever by the stratification system in America which produces greater and greater inequality rather than equality. What this means is that student success has become harder and harder to achieve. We have to achieve this together.

I hope more of my faculty colleagues will be able to spend time, even a limited amount, in rooms like I found myself in, just listening for insights and inspiration, as our student affairs colleagues talk with us about the students' worlds as they see this in 2012.

Happy Birthday FYE

2-15-12

I can't believe it. On February 17th, something I started by flying by the seat of my pants back in 1981, with the assistance of one overworked administrative assistant, will become the 31st offering of the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. I understand from my successors at the University of South Carolina that the event will draw over 1800 participants. That is a far cry from the 173 pioneers who joined us for the first one in February 1982.

We chose February originally because I thought holding a trial balloon conference would have a better chance of being viable if we held it dead in the middle of a beautiful South Carolina winter—that would guarantee a good showing of “Yankees” who would come down to see if we wore shoes in the winter.

We held the meeting in Columbia, South Carolina, until 2000 when we felt compelled to honor the NAACP national boycott against South Carolina for flying the Confederate battle flag, literally, at the foot of the steps to enter the South Carolina state Legislature. So since 2000 we have been moving the meeting around major US cities.

As I head off this year to the meeting I find myself wondering what I can conclude from this meeting is the real first-year experience this year in terms of where the several hundred session presenters will be inviting us to focus.

I have come to increasingly believe that the real “FYE” is in the highest enrollment, high failure rate courses—and that more than all other areas of possible focus, is where we most need to be directing our attention.

But I will soon see what higher education thinks we should be paying attention to this year.

This event is always like Christmas to me of sorts. So many gifts, from so many fine people— albeit educational gifts but still prized greatly.

Retrospective: Planning Your College Career as If You Knew the Competencies You Needed

2-22-12

I have either been going to college or working in higher education for 51 years. And I had hoped by now that our students wouldn't still be primarily putting in seat time, measuring their progress through college by the accumulation of credits. But they continue to do this because we continue to offer them this.

I am grateful to my little private, liberal arts, alma mater, Marietta College, for many things: including the fact that they never made me choose a major. Had I been forced to do so like most students I would be even narrower than I am. And I am pretty narrow as it is.

There is so much I don't know, particularly in the arenas that most of my fellow citizens know much more about: sports and pop culture. Case in point (I am reminded of this because I write as I fly to Texas): a few years ago I was picked up at DFW and was being driven to the University of Texas at Arlington. My host pointed out to me a large structure by the side of the road and remarked "And that is the home of the Texas Rangers". And I responded quite seriously: "And why do the cops need a building like that?" I didn't understand that the Texas Rangers are a professional athletic team.

I think we need to be doing for students what I wish I had done when I started college. I wish that I had had a list of competencies that I wanted and that the advising process, and the curriculum, would have enabled me to design my college education expressly to develop these competencies.

What competencies would I have wanted? Well, exactly the ones I have needed to be successful in my career and personal life:

1. Understanding how to effect change in organizations
2. Understanding why organizations and their human subjects resist change
3. Outstanding written and verbal communication skills
4. Empathy skills for career and personal life
5. Capacity and courage for moral and ethical decision making
6. The abilities to understand and navigate organizational politics
7. The abilities to further the cause of social justice
8. Knowledge to make me a successful parent and spouse
9. Personal finance knowledge and skills
10. Understanding my country's history and political systems and how they affect the country and world in which I work and live.

I could go on. But you get the point. I think it is possible to plan a college experience to learn the above...both in the curriculum and co-curriculum. Too bad we don't give credit for some of these.

Reporting Live from the 31st Annual First-Year Experience Conference 2-21-12

The 31st Annual First-Year Experience Conference has just concluded, either the largest or second largest in our history—the final tally has yet to be completed. There were nearly 2000 in attendance including 300 representatives from the host state of Texas and from over 600 institutions from nine countries—and this isn't even marketed as an "international" conference!

The meeting was held in San Antonio, an ideal convention center unless you are a bar owner during the annual meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous which I learned from a taxi driver recently met there. The city's convention center is the most attractive and comfortable I have ever seen.

In light of the fact that this was my 31st annual meeting, the only person there for all 31, I found myself asking what is/was different about this one? What is perennial? What are the concerns and issues? What's new?

From my perspective the most remarkable thing is the given: the FYE movement has become institutionalized. It is now the establishment. It has gone mainstream.

The meeting continues to draw at least half first-timers each year. This is a very healthy indicator.

The meeting had over 60 for-profit exhibitors which shows the alliance of shameless commerce with the academy these days. I would not have predicted or wanted this 32 years ago when I conceived the idea for the conference. But it is very apparent that the forces of capitalism have discovered there are many things we either don't do well enough on our own or that we want to outsource to them. The driver for this, of course, is retention.

When we started what is now a "movement" we found that the initial champions were our colleagues in Student Affairs. Now, they don't need to be the champions. That's because the academic affairs folks are there, engaged, so much so there is much talk of formerly Student Affairs functions being reorganized into Academic Affairs reporting lines—true testimony to the quality of the job Student Affairs professionals have done in persuading the academy of the importance of their work to the academic success of college students.

For many years in the late 80's and earlier 90's we worked very hard to recruit senior leaders: presidents/chancellors, vice presidents to these meetings. We even used to waive their registration fees if they would just come and bring a team of at least In 2012 just a handful of them were in evidence. I think what this means is that they are already sold; they don't need to be convinced. They get it. But I still wish more of them were there.

The conference attendees seemed to me to be evenly divided between three constituencies: academic affairs administrators, student affairs administrators, and faculty. And we had students with us too. I so admire institutions that are willing to invest their precious travel monies to bring students. I can only conclude that our original goal in 1981 to organize a conference to bring together those constituencies to rally around a common focus—the welfare of beginning college students, is still the dominant cultural characteristic of this meeting.

The senior representative of one vendor announced in a plenary session that the goal of her company was to create "successful e-learners." I found myself asking if I had worked all these years for the goal of creating "successful e-learners." My answer was that I wanted much more than that.

Let's Get Back to Basics: What is the Purpose of our Work?

2-29-12

I have had two mental occasions recently to remind me that those of us in the social justice business for undergraduate college students need to keep reminding ourselves of why we are in this work.

One occasion was sitting at a conference banquet function listening to an emissary of corporate America share her vision for our work. The other was reading a story about a courageous college graduate who gave her life to achieve the mission of her work which she was inspired to pursue as a result of her college experience.

Some context: we wouldn't be involved in our collective work to accomplish "student success" were it not for the great strides made in "access" to college, made possible by the Higher Education Act of 1965 which was part of the larger "Great Society" legislative reform agenda to provide a more equitable America for all upwardly aspiring citizens. And even though I have been working on educational reform issues for decades now that go beyond simply providing "access", it seems that the higher ed and political establishments have just discovered that "access" isn't quite enough. No, besides "access" we need "success" and this has become defined and enshrined in public policy, campus based initiatives, and in all sorts of products for-profit America is selling the establishment by one word: "retention".

Another way of defining this new found public discovery of "success" is with the phrase "getting through" as in "getting through" undergraduate education to degree attainment. Now, those of us working in the first-year experience vineyards since well before the first national conference on this topic in 1983, now we are joined, thank goodness, by many prominent foundations (such as Lumina and Gates), by national organizations or projects such as Complete College America and Completion by Design and/or Achieving the Dream—and too the work of my non-profit organization—all working towards that common goal: attainment/completion, whatever the word/phrase du jour may be. This is a hugely important development. We need and our students need all the help they can get.

But I find myself continually wanting to return to the question(s): what is the purpose of all this? Is the purpose of the academy now to "retain" students, to "get them through"? So why do we want to "get them through"? What do we want them to do, to know, as a result of having "gotten them through"? Is completion per se the goal or a means to multiple goals? Are we unintentionally confusing means with ends?

Two recent perspectives for me on the purposes of getting students through follow below.

The first was at the just completed 31st annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. At an occasion for a plenary gathering, to award and recognize what we call "Outstanding First-Year Advocates", a senior official of a for-profit corporation that was sponsoring this awards ceremony told the several thousand educators in the room that she was confident we in the audience shared her company's goal "of creating successful e-learners" and then she invited us all to come by her booth to show us how we could create this educational outcome. My immediate reaction was to ask myself have I labored for 45 years to create successful "e-learners"? Not on your life. This is just one more reason I don't want the thinkers in corporate America defining for us the goals of higher education. Now if she had said "successful learners" I would not have had this reaction. Admit it John: you are an academic. You do believe in the value of the academy of espousing learning for the sake of learning. But narrowing all this down to "e-learning" seemed to me the grossest possible oversimplification. It also overlooks the fact that "e-learning" is only one of many ways to promote learning. Let us hope higher education will still promote other forms of learning, inside and outside the curriculum: experiential learning; learning in an auditory fashion from the wisdom of real time college teachers still in the traditional classroom; students learning from each other in real time discussion, in addition to on-line discussion; learning through service; and many other modalities. No, "e-learning" didn't speak to me, most of all because it didn't say anything about learning for what end(s).

Five days later, as I read a page one story in [The New York Times](#) about the death of a courageous journalist who died pursuing her outcome of higher education, a foreign war correspondent, I received a reminder of a purpose of higher education, one I found much more compelling than simply completing, attaining, being retained, or becoming a successful e-learner.

"Ghastly Images Flow From Shattered Syrian City" is the February 23, 2012 [Times](#) headline for this inspiring but sad story of Marie Colvin, who died (along with another journalist) in Homs, Syria, covering the tragic slaughter that has been occurring there, so that we on the outside free and not free world can know what the Syrian

government does not want us to know. Ms Colvin, writing for [The Times](#) of London, was a 1978 graduate of Yale with a degree in anthropology. She had been a war correspondent for over 25 years, a highly dangerous but important career taking her to places as varied as the Balkans, the Middle East, Somalia, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Timor, and finally Syria. At 56, she had already paid a price for her cause, having been hit by shrapnel in 2001 in Sri Lanka, necessitating the wearing of an eye patch. On this particular assignment she had been hoping for an official visa to enter Syria but was not able to obtain one so she snuck across the border anyway, and met her end when the Syrian army shelled a building in which she had sought refuge.

As I read further about Marie Colvin in a separate [New York Times](#) interview with her mother, I learned that while an undergraduate at Yale she took a course from the Pulitzer Prize winning writer, John Hersey. According to her mother, Ms. Colvin also became a writer for the student newspaper, [The Yale Daily News](#) and "decided to become a journalist."

Now when I think of the purposes of degree completion, this kind of impact is what moves me, motivates me. This is what our work is all about. Certainly, in my case, not about creating successful "e-learners" and not just about retention, albeit recognizing that we do need to retain students in order to impact them. I would prefer to think that we retain students because we impact them. The life of Marie Colvin reminds me that our cause –those of us higher educators striving for student success–must be about providing transformative educational experiences (such as being influenced by inspiring professors and having powerful developmental experiences on campus that link the co-curriculum and the curriculum) that changed our students' lives forever, for the better, having moved them in totally new directions from the epiphany or epiphanies they have experienced while with us (probably not reading textbooks on line).

What is the Role of the President/Chancellor in Improving the First Year?

2-27-12

For any readers who read one of my preceding posts, they will recall I had just returned from the 31st annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. A recurrent theme in almost every session I attended was the role of the President/Chancellor. There was unanimity that this person and role mattered greatly in the priority assigned on a particular campus to paying more attention to new students. There was also a tremendous range of views and opinions on how attendees' leaders were using their influence with respect to improving the first year.

Let's back up. I remember back in the US 2000 Presidential campaign that Ralph Nader argued that there were no real essential differences between the Republican and Democratic candidates and that if the citizenry wanted real change they needed to support him. But this left a profound question: what difference does the CEO make?

That's the question I am writing to raise here. And this question is very much on my mind because the non-profit organization which I lead is hosting a brief "institute" this April for Presidents/Chancellors only. We haven't done anything like this for over a decade so I am feeling a bit rusty at approaching this cohort on my favorite subject, the importance of the new and transfer student experiences. And just the thought of presenting anything to this elite leadership class is daunting as I know of no group which is more challenged in terms of managing attention deficit disorder as they are deluged with so many competing demands for their time and mental attention, especially during the spring legislative sessions when their principal funder may be hard at work reducing their appropriation.

Some years ago the book, [In Search of Excellence](#), was on the college student best seller list, as reported by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), for a long, long time. The authors, Peters and Waterman, argued that the most important role of the CEO was/is "to manage the values" of the organization.

I have always argued—and most recently again at the conference, that this work to improve the first year is "values based." And historically, for much of the period post World War II until much, much later in the twentieth century, this work was undervalued, because the subjects to which the work was directed, namely, first-year students, were undervalued; In many places that has changed, but certainly not everywhere. And that is why I raise the question of the role of the CEO. It was clear to me at the just completed First-Year Experience conference that there are many campuses where faculty/staff do not believe their CEO places a premium value on the need to improve success of new students.

While I would be grateful if any of my readers were to offer to me any reasons why their presidents/chancellors matter, I assume that what would be more important for my readers would be to marshal their own arguments for why their leaders matter to improving the first year and how they could get those arguments in front of their president/chancellor. I think that is a very important item of business for institutionalizing the importance of first-year work on your campus. I think more leaders would be open to paying more attention if only they were approached about doing so. I hope you will push in that direction and not leave this to serendipity. There are so many campus conditions that matter - that must be in place for a stronger first year- and in my experience, the stance of the CEO is one of them. After our [Presidents/Chancellors Institute in April](#), I will write again about what arguments we used to try to persuade them they should be actively engaged in this educational conversation.

So Where Are the Men?

3-7-12

Last month while in San Antonio attending the 31st annual Conference on The First-Year Experience, I was invited to join a conversation of the Alamo Community College District's Minority Male Committee. This is a very progressive community college district and I was pleased to have this opportunity. I thought the conversation was courageous and promising. The underperformance of minority males, relative to other community college students, many of whom are not doing all that well either, is a source for great concern. Few colleges really zero in on this.

For several decades I have been noticing, as have been other observer and demographers, the larger problem of underperformance by men per se, in college. I remember visiting one of the CUNY colleges back in the 90's and noting that in a large group of "student leaders" (students active in leading clubs, organizations, service projects, and student government) there were hardly any men present. So I threw out the obvious question to the group: "Where are the men?" The answer I had in the form of a flip, but intentionally candid quip from one of the women: "It's all about sports, booze, and sex---that's where they are."

And now, every campus I visit the story is the same: men are less likely to go to college; less likely to stay when they do get there; less likely to be involved in campus leadership activities. But they still want to play football and basketball. And the historically male orientated culture still predominates at most campuses, especially those with intercollegiate revenue sports.

And just the other week, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that men were significantly less likely to participate in study abroad.

And the Census Bureau has reported that in the largest metropolitan areas of the country when comparing the salary/income levels of unmarried, college educated, 22-30 year old males vs. females, that women are now out-earning men.

There has been a great deal written now by way of attempting to explain these profound differences. I am just commenting here on what steps we might want to take about this.

First of all, I would like to see every coeducational college campus have some kind of standing task force undertake a study of male performance on that particular campus. So first of all, we need to know more about this problem on a campus by campus basis.

To do this would take a great deal of courage. Many men who run campuses are reluctant to admit we have a problem. And for some of them, there is good reason and not just denial: they may actually be pilloried for using this ostensibly well intentioned effort as one more strategy to insure male domination. I have the pleasure of living with a caring, very smart, higher education liberal like myself, but one who has no sympathy for this problem. She notes that we men are still running the country, predicts we will probably long continue to do so, and just doesn't see what the fuss is all about. My point is that on some campuses even raising the question may be politically incorrect.

It is the case that men are underrepresented as participants in many of the co-curricular activities that we know are so valuable as developmental experiences for college students, for example, service learning. One way to address this would be to abandon our "optional" approach to so much about the collegiate experience and make certain activities mandatory. Just imagine what the effect on your campus might be if you instituted a campus service requirement for graduation.

We also know that men are much less likely to see assistance, particularly in the first year of college, when they are, not surprisingly, more likely to drop out or flunk out. This is why I have long been an advocate for requiring most college students to take a first-year seminar in which they will be made to use certain helping services and resources. To quote a phrase now making the rounds on many higher education circles: "students don't do optional."

Let's Hear It for Alma Mater

3-12-12

Surely some of my readers still have powerful or meaningful connections to their undergraduate *alma mater*. Personally, I wouldn't have it any other way. My *alma mater* is a very special liberal arts college, Marietta College of Ohio. I had a "powerful and meaningful" connection for 12 years when I served on their Board of Trustees from 1993 to 2005. I think and hope I was helpful to them. I eventually realized about this kind of service:

1. it is difficult to go back home again
2. it is difficult to be a prophet in one's own land
3. a little bit of me goes a long way
4. having me as a trustee is a good news/bad news story—good because I offer some good suggestions; bad because I know enough to make senior campus leaders occasionally uncomfortable
5. that I had been on the board three times as long as I had been in college there as a student
6. and had donated more money than it cost my family to send me in the 60's.

But I love keeping up with *alma mater*. And I am very proud of them. And very grateful to them for making me what I am today. But I do want to finally get to the point of this blog—and that was I recently learned something neat that *alma mater* is attempting.

Recently, as my readers know, I attended the 31st annual FYE conference. And there I had the opportunity to talk with several Marietta faculty and staff and learned this: Marietta has taken the idea of the first-year seminar and given it a unique Marietta twist. They have been offering various versions of this course genre since I started working with members of the faculty there in the late 1970's to replicate an adapted version of my course at USC, University 101.

What I have learned is that the College has just started using mid term grade reports as a trigger for inviting first-year students in academic difficulty to enroll immediately in an optional, one hour credit, first-year seminar that begins immediately, right there at midterm. And I understand that demand for the course has greatly exceeded their initial predications and planning. Nice problem to have.

Long ago I learned from my student affairs colleagues about the concept of "developmental need to know." This is really a very simple idea, namely, when students develop the need to know something that is the time to deliver to them what they now have realized they need to know. It is identical to just-in-time delivery in the manufacturing world.

Of course, when I learned of this innovation I was delighted and praised the Marietta folks responsible. And I told them that this should make for a most interesting controlled study to compare the academic performance and other measures differentiating the students who were in academic difficulty at midterms and who did chose to participate in the optional course versus those like qualified students who did not. Stay tuned and I will report what I learn.

This Could Be Us—Or Is It?

3-19-12

On a recent evening, April 14, I got home fairly late from a meeting and settled down with a glass of wine and that day's New York Times which I have been reading faithfully every day since my first year of college. And on this particular evening I turned first to the Op-Ed page and my attention was immediately riveted by an extraordinary piece written by a 33 year old now resigned executive from the world's premiere investment bank, Goldman Sachs, one Greg Smith. As I devoured this piece, I knew that I would be hearing about this column the very next day as a hard news story.

And I was right. The very next day The Times ran above the fold, on page 1, its lead piece "Public Rebuke of Culture at Goldman Opens Debate."

I assume that most of my readers will have already been reading and hearing about this public resignation via op-ed column and all the varied opinions it has engendered. I read the piece and found myself immediately saying "this could be us", the "us" being US higher education not-for-profit institutions. And then I found myself asking "Or is it?"

The basic theme of the original Times column was that this young man had discovered this world class company not to be what he had come to expect, even though the reader would assume the writer had personally reaped great financial gain—a company that had lost its original culture and vision, in effect, its soul. Instead of having the best interests of its clients as the foremost objective of all its business transactions, the only objective reported by this successful trader (not "traitor") was making extraordinary sums of money by taking advantage of your clients.

As I read this piece I found myself recalling the conversation themes emerging from a recurrent session that I co-facilitate under the leadership of my colleague at USC, Stuart Hunter, and my wife, Betsy Barefoot, at each of the conferences organized by USC's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. These sessions are entitled "Spirituality, Authenticity and Wholeness in Higher Education." These are essentially facilitated discussion sessions around this theme, in which the concept of "spirituality" does not necessarily mean a conventional definition of that term, but rather more generically one's ultimate and most important values. Participants, always a capacity crowd, are asked to reflect on to what extent are the practices of their particular college or university congruent with the most important values and beliefs of the employed educators in this discussion. And then to consider how do we respond and manage circumstances when our basic values are not congruent with the policies and practices of our institution? And this was exactly the situation that Mr. Smith at Goldman Sachs found himself in: how was he to act when his values were no longer consistent with the prevailing values' culture at Goldman. When he realized he could no longer give the company line to college student intern candidates applying for coveted internships at Goldman it was a moment of truth for him. How do we deal with our inner selves, and our outer behaviors, if and when we are not congruent with the institutional party line of our employers? That is a question of relevance here.

As I read and thought about the original column further I couldn't help but substituting the word "students" for the word "clients" in his piece. And I found myself recalling from these discussion sessions referenced above the deep concerns expressed as the dominant theme, namely, the academy has become all about money too. It has become corporatized. What matters now in many ways more than the students is money. And increasingly my friends and colleagues from the academy report the question is now what could we do to "save" money but to "make" money. Thus, very much like the airlines, basic parts of the experience for which we never charged before, have become monetized. I don't even need to provide examples. My readers will immediately understand.

One More Pressure Point on Retention

3-21-12

Try as hard as I am—and have been, to drive a higher education reform agenda on the beginning college experience for the primary reason of the intrinsic values of helping needy new college students and improving the educational quality of the first-year experience, everything keeps coming back to retention as the primary reason we should be doing anything for new students.

One example is the announcement by the President in the State of the Union Address that the government would be examining the issue of excessive tuition increases in colleges and universities. Even though the right thinks that all of us in the academy are much more to the left of center, we can be certain that the President's announcement of Federal scrutiny of what we charge our students was not warmly greeted by college leaders.

This matter of what college costs is inextricable from retention and graduation rates. In order to get costs down, we have to get those rates up to decrease time-to-degree completion costs.

I write about this here with my primary intended audience being those who are responsible for or working in any initiatives that are connected on campuses to this retention agenda. It is always a challenge to make sure that front line troops get the big picture. What is the larger national context for the importance of our work? And what might be the latest external pressures that could bear on our work. And this external pressure is potentially a big one.

Perhaps the saving grace for colleges and universities will be that in this climate anything the President wants that could help him get reelected will be blocked by the "loyal minority" in the Congress. However, this issue could end up being truly bipartisan as there are plenty of Republican voters that also want to see college tuition rates decrease.

One bottom-line conclusion here I think we can all agree on is that this issue is just one more to make our work improving the success of new students even more important. I have always maintained that this work is in the national interest.

Prejudice: The New But Not So New Underclass

3-26-12

Sociology 101 was one of those truly transformative courses I took, thank goodness, in my first- year of college. And it changed my outlook on my fellow human beings forever.

One of the first definitions I learned had to do with prejudice, defined (I can recall from perfect memory) as “a preconceived opinion, either favorable or unfavorable, held by one group and directed towards another group, usually without any previous interaction or experience.”

I have lived my adult professional life in the academy, all but several years in the military in the Vietnam era, where, interestingly, I saw far less prejudice than in the civilian world of the time. In the academic world, of course, we are encouraged, and some of us rewarded, for being highly rational in our intellectual pursuits. I was predisposed (“prejudiced”) to expect a much lower incidence of prejudice in my academic community than in the “outside” world. And, in some important respects that is what I found, thank goodness.

But that is not to say I did not find prejudice. The greatest example I found was towards beginning college students which led me to pursue a career ending discrimination against that cohort. I also discovered prejudice amongst and across faculty cohorts, for example, the powerful prejudice and disdain many arts and science faculty had for their faculty colleagues in Education. For 13 years of my career I was a senior “system” officer in a multi-campus, public, state university system where we had a research flagship university, “four-year” and “two-year” campuses. And the prejudice I saw directed by those in the upper tiers towards those in the lower tiers was truly invidious. In my later phase of higher education work where I work across and between institutional sectors, especially two-year and four-year, I have seen a great deal of prejudice across those sectors, most noticeably directed by four-year faculty and administrators towards their counterparts in the community colleges.

But as my career has evolved I have found myself working harder and harder to bring four-year and two-year educators together. And I am finding a much greater willingness for educators to engage in ventures that bring them together across sectors. Naturally, I find this encouraging. There are all sorts of reasons for this somewhat greater openness to transcend such boundaries but I am not writing this piece to describe those factors. Instead, I want to comment on one remaining most invidious form of prejudice, that is directed towards transfer students. This is not a new prejudice. It’s been around a long time. But they are my new underclass of focus!

I noticed this years ago but didn’t really start to do anything about it until 2008 when we, the non- profit organization for which I work, began to design an assessment, planning, improvement process, known as Foundations of Excellence® Transfer Focus, the goal of which is to: improve the transfer sending process in community colleges and the transfer receiving process in four- year institutions. We launched FoE Transfer Focus in 2009 and since then have had 46 four and two-year colleges participate. This is all in the name of improving transfer student success. A way to do that is to come to better understand transfer students, and especially what is really happening to them on our campuses—and hence to reduce our prejudice towards them.

A part of our Foundations of Excellence Transfer Process involves a very stimulating (I think) exercise known as a “policy audit.” In that we ask our participating institutions to inventory and then analyze all the rules, regulations, policies they have developed (often over decades) towards (in this case) transfer students. We ask them to look for consistency across these policies; and appropriateness for the realities and needs of this population now; and currency of the original rationale. It is appropriate to ask why was the policy adopted in the first place? Who was the prime mover(s)? Is that person or office still found at the institution or even still living?! Of course, rules have a way of taking on lives of their own. But we made them. And we can unmake them.

A Step to Mitigate the August Train Wreck

4-2-12

This morning I read a sign of relief—relief from the disaster that is the August train wreck on so many campuses in our country. The August train wreck is my metaphorical reference to our continuing to allow a public school, K-12 model of allowing all students who want to be educated to show up over a few days before the start of the term to be registered and allowed to begin. Our campuses are not geared for this onslaught and it is inevitable that we make all kinds of mistakes and thus insure that many of our students have been admitted with an opportunity to fail.

What did I read? I read the Friday, March 30, page one, above the fold, article in The New York Times reporting “[2-Year College Squeezed, Sets 2-Tier Tuition](#)”.

The piece goes on to describe Santa Monica College’s decision to offer some courses, starting summer registration, at “...a higher price so that students who are eager to get into a particular class can do so if they pay more.”

I realize this practice will not be greeted with universal approbation by my readers. It may even remind the historically conscious of the policy during the US Civil War that allowed some citizens to purchase their way out of the obligation towards subscription.

But I have long urged, always to not a single positive response, that we need to move towards a pricing tiered model that charges students as a function of when they register, how far they plan ahead. This would insure that they started the term on time, were able to experience orientation, obtained a better selection of course and schedule, and perhaps most important, actually attend the first, second, third even, class meeting. This would be diametrically different from the situation now where at many of our colleges students register and start classes late, because we allow it. And because we allow it, because we want their money and body count, many of them are more likely to be unsuccessful, especially in the critical first term of college.

Who knows where this one college’s experiment with “2 tier” pricing will go? I certainly don’t. But as an example of risk taking and experimentation to improve a situation, I am glad to see this happen.

We have to mitigate the August train wreck. And surely there have to be other ways to do this. But rewarding students to plan ahead, and penalizing those who don’t, may be one way. This could be for everyone’s good. We’ll see. Our colleagues at Santa Monica College may well have started something that will go further than they initially intended. I hope so.

We Weren't Designed for These People: Discrimination against Transfer Students – Part One

4-9-12

As part of the Foundations of Excellence® Transfer Focus self study process, one of the core services provided by the non-profit organization which I lead, we work with institutions to complete what we call a "Current Practices Inventory (CPI)". This CPI includes an enumeration of all the policies, rules, etc that pertain to transfer students. Another part of the Inventory is a listing of all the programs and interventions offered to assist transfer students, rationale and goals for such interventions and numbers and proportions of total population served. This inventory is part of an overall process of self study to critically examine everything the institution does, either to send transfer students or to receive them. This self study then becomes the basis for an action plan to improve institutional performance.

It has been in the process of assisting institutions in this Foundations of Excellence self study process, that we have had the opportunity to observe colleges and universities, particularly those on the receiving end, identify and acknowledge both policies and practices that we could label as discriminatory, meaning providing less favorable treatment for transfer students than that received by "native" students.

Perhaps the most important statement I can make about what all this means is to suggest that almost all American colleges and universities were NOT designed for transfer students. They were designed many decades, even centuries ago, and that design and accompanying culture remains dominant. And this is a culture that assumes that students come to the institution, most often as a first choice, often live on campus, do not pursue remunerative employment while in college, attend full time, and remain at the same institution for the entire undergraduate period. For students who can experience that kind of undergraduate education, indeed college works very well. No surprise - that's what it was designed to do. But for students who enter after the traditional beginning term or year, that is who "transfer", the experience is very different.

In our work with these "transfer focus" self studies we have observed institutions discovering and honestly reporting that they have policies and practices which by design favor "native" over transfer students. These are policies with respect to these critical areas:

1. Acceptance of credits
2. Financial aid
3. On-campus residential living
4. Orientation
5. Academic advising
6. Registration
7. Eligibility for participation in student organizations
8. Opportunity for on-campus employment

Let's consider just the first two in this posting and we can address the others in remaining posts.

1. Acceptance of credits: students who start at institution A are much more likely to have their general education credits earned at institution A apply to bachelors degrees of choice awarded by institution A. These so-called "native" students, especially in large institutions, still will face internal transfer, but they will fare better than external transfers.

2. Financial aid: it is commonly the case that institutional aid (non federal or state funded aid) is given priority to native continuing students, as opposed to new incoming transfer students. It is far less common for there to be special or substantial set asides of aid for transfer students.

Transfer Discrimination: Part 3

4-13-12

I shall continue in this vein of delineating the various ways I have noted that baccalaureate receiving transfer institutions treat these students differently than "native" students.

7. Eligibility for participation in student organizations: it has long been known that another predictor for retention is joining behaviors when directed towards institutionally sponsored and licensed student organizations, clubs, activities. There again we are discovering instances of policies which favor native, full-time students, who start early in the undergraduate period with these organizations. The realm of participation in intercollegiate athletics is another type of student experience which is highly skewed to favor the non-transfer student.

8. Opportunity for on-campus employment: there has long existed good research to substantiate the finding that both where and how much a student works during the undergraduate years is a predictor for graduation. Of particular note is the finding that college students, who work on campus, controlling for the same amount of hours worked when compared to students who work off campus, are more likely to graduate. Because the availability of on-campus employment, particularly that which may not be tied to eligibility for College Work Study funding, is limited, naturally, native students have a better shot at initially obtaining and retaining these positions, thus making it more difficult for transfer students to secure these plum assignments.

In summary, the existing organizational structures, policies, traditions, and culture are highly biased in favor of non-transfer, "native" students.

I know this is only a partial list. I would be interested in hearing from my readers of other examples they have observed in their own or other higher education settings.

This series of three blogs does not address at all however this phenomena in community colleges which also were not designed either for their own transfer students, often described as "reverse transfer", which now has a whole new meaning, with respect to awarding retroactive associate degrees to students who transferred "out" before completing that degree. But I will leave this topic to another posting perhaps.

I wrote these three blogs because I am concerned with the bias against transfer students even though the experience is now normative. As a country we cannot attain our aspirational goals for increasing baccalaureate completion rates unless we provide more equitable treatment to transfer students.

Transfer Discrimination, Part 2

4-11-12

In my previous posting I was attempting to enumerate examples of disadvantageous discrimination against transfer students. I was just getting started with several examples of discrimination, having presented two such. Here are some more.

3. Eligibility for on-campus residential living accommodations: in part, because of demand outstripping supply, and the long standing tradition of requiring on-campus housing only for first-year students, the majority of institutions do not have capacity to provide on campus housing for all the students who might desire such. Priority then is almost universally given to new, first-year students, and continuing students, space permitting. In that sort of prioritization, transfers are left either out or way behind. This affects probability of degree attainment as we have long known that one of the better predictors of who will graduate is where the student lived (on or off campus), particularly in the first year. Bottom line: on campus residency predicts for degree completion.

4. Orientation: This is another traditional college function that was designed for the "traditional" aged student, largely who was beginning college for the first time at a given university. There is a grossly disproportionate emphasis in terms of institutional time, energy and effort already directed to this function with variance by institutional type. This means that the more selective, residential, traditional aged student focused, and baccalaureate degree awarding the institution is, the more likely it is to devote substantial support for orientation for new and native students. Many institutions will even require orientation for its new students. In these same institutions, this will almost never be the case for transfer students, for whom orientation if offered at all, will be "optional" and will be much less extensive. In spite of evidence that transfer students need orientation, and that just because a transfer student was successful at a prior institution, does not mean the same student will be as successful at the new institution, orientation is not offered for transfers with the same degree of emphasis, time, options, imprimatur. In effect then, we are giving transfers more opportunity to be less successful than native students.

5. Academic Advising: Due to the professionalization of academic advising underway on college campuses since the late 1970's, with the advent of the National Association for Academic Advising in 1977, it is now well established, especially in baccalaureate institutions, that first-year students are well identified targets of opportunity and priority for emphasis for intrusive academic advising, often coupled with "early alert" systems to monitor signs of student underperformance in courses more typically taken by traditional new students. Such early alert systems are usually not targeted on either transfer students per se or especially on upper division courses that transfer students are more likely to be enrolled in. Institutions have made great investments in the recruitment, selection, training, evaluation, and rewarding of academic advisors for students new to college. There is no comparable effort for transfer students. Rather than being advised in a central intake advising unit, transfer students are much more likely to be advised on a decentralized basis in the academic units which award the degrees they transferred to obtain. With respect both to priority and quality in these units, academic advising is a cottage industry with almost no institution-wide effort to guarantee common standards for the quality of this effort. Hence, once again, the odds are stacked in favor of the native students.

6. Registration: all colleges have course registrations that include some kind of system for prioritization. And within that priority system, there are evidences of transfers receiving lower registration priority than native and continuing students. Obviously, when you register determines the probability the student will be able to receive optimal times, and especially access to required courses needed for timely progression in the major.

The above are enough for one posting. Do any of these apply to your institution? If so, how might you address some redress of these?

The End of the Term Calls for Some Silence

4-23-12

Here it is nearing the end of the traditional academic term. At this point in the semester I always found it difficult to restrain my natural inclination to give my students some unsolicited advice, not only about how best to cope with finals period, but some perspectives on their decisions that might be made after term ended and before the next one—like whether or not to come back.

A few months ago I was on a campus and was given a fairly lengthy tour by an outstanding senior. As we walked and talked and began to get to know each other, I learned that he was confronting two major decisions: 1) whether to take a lucrative job in corporate America or go to graduate school; 2) and if graduate school, whether or not to go to same grad school as his significant other. If he chose # 1 it would very likely mean the end of his relationship and if he chose a graduate school other than one she was committed to, probably the same result for the relationship. I mean these were really heavy duty decisions. And any choice he made could have lifelong consequences.

As we walked his beautiful campus we strolled by the chapel. I asked him what it was used for and if he ever used it himself. He told me he had never been inside, and he had been there all four years, on a residential campus. So I offered to escort him inside! We wandered in and we both noted how quiet it was. I suggested he return sometime, alone, and just sit down and think about his choices.

This student was like the overwhelming majority of today's college students—they live lives without silence. They are constantly connected. But their connections are mainly for succinct communications and rarely involve any thinking or communicating in depth of any kind.

I find myself constantly having an interior monologue with myself speculating if my life, and those of others around me are, on balance, better with all out gadgets for connectivity. It is, of course, not a simple yes, no, or even maybe. I am one of many academics and public intellectuals who have become very concerned for the alienating effects of technology on our students, how in some ways it prevents the very depth and intimacy that I wish they could experience, both personally and intellectually.

There are two excellent writings just out on this that have come to my attention, one the day of my writing this blog and the other just a week or so before. I recommend the piece "[The Flight from Conversation](#)" in "Sunday Review" of [The New York Times](#), April 22, 2012, page 1, above the fold, by Sherry Turkle. She is a psychologist and faculty member at MIT and the author of [Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other](#).

The second piece is the most recent issue of the [Atlantic](#). On the cover there is an undressed couple in an intimate embrace. The man is looking over the woman's shoulder and holding up his smart phone without her being able to see what he is doing. He has a frenzied look on his face as he reads his phone screen, while his lover unknowingly appears lost and content in her own embrace. The article is entitled "Is Facebook Making us Lonely?" It is written by Stephen Marche.

When I look back on my own college experience, I can easily recall so many rich, rich experiences, intellectually, developmentally, personally. But above all, the richest were those that I experienced in conversations with others. I am so glad I didn't have a smart phone then, didn't tweet, didn't text. For me the word "text" had multiple meanings and that alone made me very different from today's students. For me, text was a noun, not a verb. And here ends my "text" for the day.

Reaching Out to High Schools and Our Future Students

4-24-12

I did something the other night that I do once or twice a year. I visit(ed) the local secondary school, Brevard High School, in the lovely little western North Carolina mountain town where I am privileged to live. My purpose was to perform one of the few forms of community service that my knowledge and skills sets ideally equip me to perform, namely: to give a talk to students and parents about the challenges of successfully making the transition to college.

The idea of doing this first came to my mind in 1995. I was living then in Lexington, South Carolina during the three decades period of my life when I was on the faculty of the University of South Carolina. I had realized that my "community" largely had been my university, where I was extraordinarily involved and performing a wide range of "service." But I also lived in a residential community and had come to realize that I really wasn't contributing anything to that community other than my taxes. So I asked myself: what could I do? The idea occurred to me that I could volunteer to do some kind of presentation to Lexington High School students and parents about the one subject I really know a lot about: transition to college. So I went out and visited with the guidance staff who were cordial, but cool to me. They made it very clear that they were not authorized to invite any outside speakers. I was directed to the principal.

I met with the principal who struck me more as a prison warden. He sat rigidly behind his desk and told me stone faced that he really couldn't permit me to come into his school. I explained that I was not trying to recruit his students for USC and that I was a national authority who had something to offer his students and parents. No deal. I was really p-----! So I asked myself how could I get in that school without a formal invitation but in a perfectly legal and appropriate manner?

Luckily, my high school age son knew the father of one of his friends, said father being an employee of South Carolina Educational Television. My son, Jonathan, is a great matchmaker and he brokered an introduction of me to this friend's father. Cut to the chase: this gentleman helped me push a proposal through both USC and South Carolina Educational TV channels to produce a major video on success strategies for making the transition to college. And this same parent became the actual producer and script writer for the video, using as foundational text for the video, a book that another USC professor, Jerry Jewler, and I had written. This 60 minute video was produced and over its life sold in the seven figures range! My hope was that the high school that wouldn't let me in the door would buy and use the thing. I never did learn whether they did. But many other high schools around the state and country did.

I didn't have to do anything like this to get into my current local community high school. I have really enjoyed these occasional opportunities to meet with high school students and families and address with them their concerns about whether to go to college, how to finance, college choice, and then making a successful transition.

I am writing about this in this blog to urge my readers to do the same. I suspect that most of us post secondary educators rarely set foot in high schools. It is most helpful to get a glimpse of our future students, hear from them and about their aspirations and concerns. I actually find this inspiring to see who is in the pipeline and what is on their minds. It is important for me to be reminded how much they want to experience my sector of education and their belief that they will benefit. The reality is that successful college transition begins long before our students arrive.

In doing several of these a year I have observed some demographic patterns: female students much more likely to attend than male; and mothers much more likely to accompany their child than fathers. These parents impress me as being even more anxious about the transition than the students, at least outwardly. The coming together of parent and child for such a discussion/presentation is touching, poignant to observe and I am persuaded is one of those steps on the long journey to college success that helps bring the family closer together. That is certainly my hope.

I invite you to think about doing the same: sharing your knowledge with college bound students in your community's high school(s). My prediction is that you will be glad you did and that the students will benefit.

Academic Observations from Venice

5-3-12

I recently spent part of a day in Venice, Italy, with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, being guided by an Italian university professor, who had just finished his first year or so in what he called a "permanent" slot, our equivalent of a tenure track position. From him I learned some things that made me contrast the similarities and differences between our lives in the academy in our two countries:

- the oldest universities generally have the greatest prestige
- entry level faculty has significantly lower teaching loads than senior faculty (now there is a practice what would revolutionize the cost of instruction in US higher education! Full professors generating more credit hour productivity than assistant professors is almost hard to contemplate.
- "deans" favor those disciplines that bring in the most extramural revenue support over many fields in the humanities such as the classics
- recent graduates face unemployment rates in excess of 30% (considerably higher than the US)
- and these recent graduates are either continuing to live with parents or are moving back in with them. Same as in the US.
- and most distressingly, many of these graduates now assume they will not live as well as their parents due to the shrinkage of "permanent" jobs (with benefits) in all sectors
- Italian universities are now trying to provide more opportunities for residential accommodations for students (the picture is mixed in the US where we are very aware that on-campus residential status is a strong predictor for graduation
- where once Italian students paid no fees, now they do, at an ever increasing rate, approximately 2000 Euros per year (still low by US standards)
- Italian universities are making more efforts to assist students to increase retention and graduation rates (we invented this in the US with a lot of help from the author of this blog).
- publish or perish is alive and well in Italy
- Italian university students, and their families, do have a social safety net provided by university health coverage, about which we heard no complaints at all, except for waiting lists for non emergency elective procedures.
- Italians educators are amazed by the issues in dispute in the current US presidential election campaign, such as whether or not to have anything approaching universal health insurance coverage.

Remove One Given from Your Campus: What Difference Would It Make?

5-7-12

One of the many benefits I have found of foreign travel is the incentive it gives me to look at my work in higher education from new perspectives. Case in point: I write this piece in Venice, Italy, a city where no automobiles or bicycles are allowed due to the lack of streets ("streets" meaning vehicular conduits), narrow passageways, narrow little bridges over the canals, and heavy pedestrian traffic which must be protected. It took a while for this to sink in: that I was in a city with no cars. No automobile noise. No having to look out for vehicles that might hit me as a pedestrian. And no fire trucks or vehicular ambulances either. Amazing. What if we banned all automobiles from our campuses?

The absence of this invention that changed the landscape of America really stunned me. I am almost never anywhere in the US where cars are banned. And the last time I was in a city that banned them was in Siena, Italy, in November of 2011. This set me thinking about the plethora of impacts on American civilization wrought by the automobile including: the liberation of women (sexual, familial, and professional); the liberation of teenagers (sexual); the creation of the "burbs" and the flight from cities; the stultifying culture of the suburbs leading to the return to America's most livable and interesting cities; all the "drive-in's" from used-to-be movie theaters to eateries to liquor stores to funeral homes; to the industrial base that played a key role in our winning World War II; I could go on forever with this litany.

So what if we took just one of the givens out of the typical higher education campus? How about banning cars from residential campuses and forbidding the students to have them? Think what that would do for the "suitcase" campus. Think what that would do for student participation in co-curricular activities. Think what that would do for student engagement. And besides, we already know that teenagers are forgoing cars as a necessary tool to meet people now that they have the internet linked with the right apps for their smart phones.

What if we removed varsity revenue sports? Even just one. Now there would be a game changer. But that would be downright un-American. Which would be easier or harder to get rid of: football or automobiles?

What if we got rid of general education, and allowed our students to do what most of them want to do anyway and go right into their majors? We would reduce the time-to-degree periods necessary for a bachelors degree and save governments, families, and students a fortune?

What is there that we absolutely have to have to constitute an institution of higher learning? What could we never get rid of? The library? The faculty? No, we could redefine and outsource those two. Security. Now there's a function that could not be currently outsourced. Perhaps in a decade or two with surveillance cameras everywhere and drones on demand to rescue those in distress we could even do away with security. Well, how about administration? Surely we could never outsource or outright eliminate administration. Somebody has to be in charge.

Wait a minute, I almost forgot. Here's something else that we could not eliminate: students. But I have heard it said by some higher educators that their campuses really are nice places to work when there are no students around. This is in the same vein as I have frequently observed to flight attendants: you would have a good job if it weren't for the passengers.

I am glad I have been encouraged to think about the givens and which of them I/we could give up. It has become increasingly obvious we can't afford and don't want to keep on doing all we do, have, maintain, support in the US higher education structure, as our national public policy currently leads us on a race to the bottom.

End of Term

5-7-12

Usually I can explain, at least to myself, the way my mind works. So this posting is about a tourist visit I made while on vacation in France with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, said visit making me think of what time of the academic year it was back home—"end of term."

Betsy and I were outside the charming village of St.Remy-De-Provence in France, where we visited the mental asylum St-Paul-de-Mausolee. This is the facility where the artist, Vincent Van Gogh spent the last full year of his life, 1889-90, when at the peak of both his madness and creativity he was so inspired by the beauty surrounding him, including nearby archeological ruins of extraordinary significance, known as Glanum, literally just a few minutes' walk away. The artist discharged himself and shortly thereafter committed suicide. Visitors like ourselves can enter the building where he resided, visit his quarters and look out his sleeping room window to see the same view that had to have inspired him too.

Van Gogh's room in what still is today a psychiatric hospital, for women only, is exactly the size of an American college student's residence hall room. And this made me think of our students as they are at "the end of term" but hopefully, not at "the end of term" in the sense that Van Gogh was.

How fortunate we are to live in an era when the kind of depression, bi-polar disorder, that afflicted and killed Van Gogh, can at least be treated, managed, if not prevented, by modern medicine. Still, the end of term is one of those turning points in the academic and personal lives of our students that are stressful, and at which time students often make decisions which are not in their best long term interests.

Not so many years ago the prominent US higher education researcher, Clifford Adelman, in his now well disseminated so-called Toolbox presented us with compelling data demonstrating the correlation between attending summer school and ultimate degree attainment. Taking part in any amount of summer school accumulation of academic credit favorably advantaged students for graduation. Summer school is a way then of staying connected.

So we need to urge our students to consider ways that they could stay connected, to us that is, even though after finals they may feel compelled to disconnect, physically withdraw for a period, earn money to return, etc. But as we know from many other college student behavioral choices, the decisions they make often only exacerbate the original conditions that put them under stress in the first place, like drinking excessively or going home for visits as a means to cope with homesickness.

At the end of term then is a good time for you to help your students reflect on the significance of the term, where they are now in their college journey, what mileposts have they passed but yet have in front of them.

It is a good time for them to NOT make major decisions about whether or not to return. It is a good time for them to make the one last herculean effort to "pull their grades out".

It is a good time to remind them that in some courses, there is still hope for the power of redemption and that not all faculty grade simply on the basis of mathematical averages.

It is a good time to get them to consider some things they could do over the summer that would insure greater academic success when they return and forms of staying "connected" during the summer hiatus.

Here a College, There a College, Everywhere a College

5-9-12

My readers know that when I travel abroad it naturally encourages me to see my own country, and profession (higher education) through different lens. As I write this reflection, I have been under the influence of driving around the south of France, for a week, with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, who does all the driving and thus gives me even more opportunity to take in visually my new surroundings. And what I don't see here is what I see everywhere in the US: post secondary institutions.

In the States, almost everywhere you drive, even less populated areas, you see evidences of the huge post secondary industry in America, for our 20 million plus regular constituents (note I chose not to call them "customers", a concept I still find anathema).

We see billboards and other forms of signage, directing us to such and such a college or university. Some of them we have heard of, others we have not. Often times, separate institutions will be right across the street from each other. In some cases that was because they may have originally been founded as single sex, private, institutions and their co-location facilitated socializing of students from the same social classes, one of the original purposes of college in America.

When we read newspapers, listen to the car radio, watch television, or, of course, surf, we are inundated with advertisements for colleges and universities, usually not the elite ones, and almost always, the hungry ones.

But not in France. We have been driving now for seven days, in both the countryside and more urban areas, and haven't seen one, literally. And not one billboard advertising one either. But a quick check on the internet tells me that in this country of more than 60 million people there are at least 90 public universities and 170 professional schools, in addition to many more vocational schools. But I haven't seen one of them.

This all strikes me as somewhat paradoxical. In America where we are constantly reminded of both the need for and accessibility of higher education, as a route for upward social mobility, there are nevertheless much greater degrees of inequality as measured by such indicators as degree attainment and per capita income, than here in France where higher education is not visible at all to this naked eye. I am struck with the paradox: the ubiquity of higher education in my own country, including in the literal, visual sense, but with ever rising levels of inequality. I recall that just a few weeks ago one of the former Republican presidential candidates told an audience that if elected he would do everything within his power to maintain inequality of attainment.

And there are other things I don't see in France but I know are here to differentiate from my own country: universal health care, greater life expectancy, the 35 hour work week, retirement age pegged to government pensions at 62, and paid vacation durations that American workers have never had and never will.

I am glad though that US higher education is so omnipresent. I would certainly never want that to be any different. It is part of our transparency of trying to create opportunity. I just want to see us get better at the attainment of that opportunity.

Difficult Choices

4-30-12

My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I have a friendship with a married couple about 35 years younger than we are, who live in New Zealand. Last February when Betsy and I were vacationing in New Zealand, we visited this couple for a really enjoyable dinner. They are both US citizens, with extended families back in the US, who went to New Zealand to work on PhD's. They are about to finish their degrees and are having to decide whether or not to return to the US for employment or try to seek employment in New Zealand so they may extend their legal immigrant status, about which New Zealand is very strict. I remember when we arrived there last year, we were told we could only stay a maximum of 9 months as tourists and we had to show upon entry into the country prima facie evidence of a booked return flight out of the country. I wrote some blog postings about our visit last year.

One of the two members of this couple may be about to be offered a job in the US. I have been in communication with them about their "difficult choices". This has recalled for me my own difficult choices in 1965 when I was graduating from college and found myself contemplating whether or not I would want to live outside the US.

At my commencement time, the Vietnam War was heating up. The draft was hungrily devouring young men like me. I had already had a "deferment" from military service to be an undergraduate. To retain that privilege, I had to be in one of the following situations:

1. Enrolled in graduate school
2. Enrolled in seminary
3. Employed by a defense contractor
4. Married.

And if I couldn't fit in one of those categories, and was found to be fit for duty, but did not want to serve, then the only other option, other than declaring conscientious objector status, was to move to Canada or Scandinavia, as so many Americans did at that time.

I loved Canada. I had lived there for five years in my childhood. And I did think about moving back there. I was very opposed to the Vietnam War. I was not a conscientious objector. But I did not want to lose my US citizenship. I did not want to go to seminary. I did not want to work for a defense contractor. I was physically fit. Marriage was out of the question—not because I didn't have a candidate—actually I had two. But I knew I was not mature enough. I also knew male classmates who were rushing into matrimony to escape the draft. These were my "difficult choices". So I chose graduate school. And off I went, and a year later I got drafted anyway.

As Betsy and I think of this couple's difficult choices it is a way for us to frame these questions: what kind of a country would they be returning to versus what kind of country would they be leaving? As I have indicated above, we had recently visited New Zealand.

We so greatly enjoyed being in a sane and tolerant country. Where there is universal health insurance. Where there is little visible evidence of poverty. Where there is not visible great differences in wealth. Where there is great respect for the environment. Where it is not an armed camp with citizens relishing the possession of firearms. Where it is so safe that the young women we met felt perfectly free to hike and bike alone in the countryside and everywhere else. Where we could see no outward evidences of religious zealotry, the kind that now threatens the tradition of separation of church and state in the US. Where we saw no mobile homes. What could be more different from the United States and still speak our language?

We kept thinking if we were 30-ish, with no children yet, but wanting to have children eventually, where would we rather raise children today? Difficult choices.

American Higher Education's Race to the Bottom

5-21-12

I have been finding myself more frequently using this phrase "race to the bottom" to describe our country's full scale retreat from the strides it made from the beginning of the New Deal in the 1930's up until the early 1980's to expand opportunities for the majority of our country's population. Just the other day I read some data that I will share here which confirm for me the sad accuracy of this phrase.

As I do this let me recommend to my readers that they join me as subscribers to a truly excellent, compellingly informative, monthly publication, of the newsletter genre, [Postsecondary Education Opportunity](#). This is written and published by my friend and colleague of many years, Thomas G. Mortenson, a higher education policy analyst and Senior Scholar with The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. As Tom would tell you himself, he is a recovering former financial aid analyst, who produces this marvelous publication from his home basement office in Oskaloosa, Iowa. I would describe Tom as American's higher education demographer, par excellence. And, he is a demographer with a conscience.

Once in a while, usually by a graduate student or relatively new entry into the field of promoting college students success, I am asked: "John, what do you read on a regular basis that keeps you informed in the manner in which you feel you need to be to stay at the top of your game...." I always include this publication in my short list in response to this interesting and important question.

I have come to think of Tom as higher education's Paul Revere. Take a brief glimpse below for why I think this way.

In the 238th monthly edition of this newsletter, said serial subtitled "Public Policy Analysis of Opportunity for Postsecondary Education", he has entitled the issue "[Bachelor's Degree Attainment in the United States and OECD Countries, 1940-2011](#)".

I want to share just some of what Tom reports in this addition and hope that it will be grist for your mill to exhort others that we can and must do better in higher education and I will hereby quote liberally from Tom's message:

"Since around 1980 federal, state, and institutional policy choices have restricted and narrowed educational opportunities.

*The federal government has moved away from need-based grants toward educational loans and most recently toward tax credits. Resources previously focused on those students who need them are increasingly shared with others who don't need them.

*The states have sharply reduced their annual investment efforts in higher education, forcing institutions to raise their tuition....

*Many four-year colleges and universities have chosen to pursue revenues and prestige by competing in super-saturated and shrinking markets of affluent students, and ignoring the huge, growing and seriously underserved markets of students from low income family backgrounds.

These regressive, restrictive and redistributive policy choices have produced predictable results:

*By the early 1990's many measures of college participation had stopped growing—they had 'flatlined'

*The generation of young adults ages 25-34 years old was no better educated than was the generation of their parents....

*The growing share of college students with Pell Grants was decreasingly represented in public and private four-year colleges and universities, and increasingly concentrated in community colleges and proprietary institutions...."

Reflections in the Little League Baseball Park

6-4-12

During my 32 years on a major university campus I often attended events organized by the Athletic Department to recognize and celebrate the accomplishment of student athletes. And I would always leave thinking "Oh, if only we were as good at this kind of thing on the academic side.....recognizing our students academic achievements—before and in addition to waiting for Commencement." But, of course, we weren't, and we aren't.

I have two grown sons now. During the years when we all lived together I spent countless hours in the Little League ballpark for practices and games. I was definitely the odd ball parent. My briefcase was always with me (in the era before smart phones and the internet) and I never entered the park without something to read. I was reminded of what this scene was all about the other night.

My seven year old grandson was playing a doubleheader championship series for the end of his Little League season. This is in a South Carolina community, Lexington, a suburb of the state's capitol, Columbia. The public schools there are better than the state's average but living there years ago and returning now I always knew that the community was much more invested in its athletic facilities—particularly baseball. I had forgotten how enormous these facilities were, multiple playing fields, well illuminated, clubhouses for each, acres and acres of parking and many hundreds of parents out each night. And out enthusiastically too. Cheering the children on.

My grandson's team won the double header and he contributed with a nice base hit from which he ran all the bases on in. There was a ceremony declaring his team the league champions and the head coach offered a homily which included a reminder to patronize the businesses that had sponsored the team. It was the perfect mix of extolling the virtues of competition, character building, and capitalism—with special emphasis on the competition and pursuit of the male values system—to which the ballpark complex is a living temple to pursue worship of this value system.

And I found myself trying to imagine what our country would be like if we could turn out hundreds of children and their families on a late spring night to watch children in spelling competitions; or solving math problems; or playing chess; or practicing debate; or in pre-pre college bowl type quiz games. Oh, John, get real. This will never happen.

So that brings us back to higher education. What can we do to better recognize our students' academic accomplishments? How could we give college athletic departments a run for the money in this regard? We could bring students together in healthy competitive environments to foster the development of other kinds of skills. How could we bring all our students together for such ritualized competition around academic skills that would equally affirm male and female students? This could be done. That's my successor generation's challenge...one of many of them.

I'm still the oddball in the ballpark. Good thing there are universities for people like me.

College Success: Misnomer?

5-11-12

I have just been reminded by one of my colleagues in our non-profit organization, Dr. Betsy Griffin, of some very interesting data she has compiled, which calls into question for me whether or not the courses many institutions call "college success" or "student success" are properly named as such....?! I shall explain.

Dr. Griffin has been analyzing data our Institute collects from colleges and universities we work with in our signature work, Foundations of Excellence. Quite simply, this is an assessment and action/improvement process designed to reengineer the first year of college to improve student success. One of the components of the FoE process is examining institutional data on what we call "high DWFI" rate courses (grades awarded in these classes being D's, W's, F's and/or Incompletes). In her recent analysis, she looked at data from 356 courses that were reported by our participating institutions as being what they would define as "high DWFI" rate courses. These courses included the course with the highest percentage of DWFI grades, developmental math, in which 46% of the final grades awarded were DWFI's, to the lowest, Speech, with 25% DWFI's. Of particular relevance to this blog posting was the finding that 29% of the grades awarded for the first-year seminar/college success/student success courses were D's, W's, F's and/or Incompletes.

When we share this data with audiences, as we have over the past three years during which we have consistently found the percentage of DWFI grades in college success courses ranging in the upper 20 percent range, we are often greeted with surprise. Some educators apparently didn't know this was a course students could perform in at an unsatisfactory level, let alone fail. I think there is a negative assumption, I would call it a prejudice, that these courses are somehow less "real" than other college courses and that grades in these courses are some kind of gifts to students. Such was the case even at my own institution, home of the flagship course of the genre, University 101. The reality was that during my quarter century of leadership for that course we found each term, quite predictably, 4-5% of the students enrolled did not receive a satisfactory grade. A significant number of students nationally enroll for these courses but do not receive a satisfactory grade. So what is going on?

Is the course, known now in the academy as the "student success" or "college success" course, properly named if this high a percentage of students are not achieving success in the very course that commits to making students more successful in college by teaching them how to do college? Is this a misnomer?

I think not. This is one more reason why I would prefer to use the formal terminology in the higher education lexicon for this course type: first-year seminar, or new student seminar.

So if a significant number of students, who enroll in these courses widely promoted as helping students to become more successful, are not being successful, what might explain these high DWFI rates?

1. The exact same factors that explain student underperformance in other college courses!
2. Some new college students really do flunk college. I learned at my own institution in our internal assessments of the first-year seminar, University 101, that receipt of the final grade of F was one of the very best predictors we had of a student who would not be retained from first to second year.
3. Some students don't think they need such a course and don't give it a chance. They think they have done all this in high school.
4. Some students just don't take it seriously, blow it off, and are rudely surprised with their final grade.
5. About 25% of the institutions that offer these courses provide no faculty development at all to prepare instructors to teach this course. Thank goodness the other 75% of the institutions that offer such courses do provide some form of instructor training. We could therefore assume the instruction in the setting where no instructor training is provided may leave something to be desired. Notice I am now shifting the focus of a possible understanding of poor performance in the college success genre to institutional responsibility as opposed strictly to student responsibility!
6. Only about half of the institutions that offer faculty development require such training of all instructors (as we do at USC). Given that teaching first-year seminar is not a "discipline" for most instructors, this lack of sufficient emphasis on training may well explain poor grades as being correlated with the quality, or lack of it, of the instruction.
7. Sadly, I hear in my travels around our country's college and university campuses that many of them have a substantial proportion of the course sections taught by adjuncts. There is mounting evidence that there is a direct correlation between amount of credits students receive provided by adjuncts and probability of degree attainment. This is a course where part of the success of the course for students

depends on the nature of the relationship they develop with the instructor and on the knowledge the instructor has of the institution, its people, resources, services. Adjuncts by definition cannot possibly have the same level of institutional engagement as full-time instructional personnel and hence being a student in an adjunct taught section, a luck of the draw, may further explain student underperformance.

8. Another factor may be the amount of credit. It is the case that the amount of credit influences the expectations both instructors and students have of student performance. Unfortunately, a very significant proportion of these courses are only one credit. In such academic contexts, students and faculty alike often don't treat these as "real" courses. Expectations are lower and hence performance outcomes are lower.

Whatever the reasons, I am dismayed that this significant a segment of students enrolled in college success courses are not performing at a level we would describe as "college success." Surely, those of us how teach in and lead such courses must take steps to improve overall performance.

80% of Success is Simply Showing Up—Or Is It?

6-12-12

This now famous 2006 quote from Woody Allen rang in my ears recently when I had a conversation with a family member about their first grade child's perfect attendance for the entire school year. This has been the stimulus for this blog posting about two things: the role of attendance in student success and how our incoming college students have been rewarded for the attainment of minimum standards.

In the course of this conversation I learned of the great disappointment of a family when they learned that their son was not going to be awarded a prize for perfect attendance in the entire first grade year even though they had been greatly looking forward to the conferral of such a prize. This seven year old attends an elite private school. He had indeed attended every day. And his parents had assumed that entitled him to a coveted perfect attendance award—coveted by both the parents and the child. But they learned just before the end of school year ceremony that there would be no prize because the child had been tardy a sufficient number of times and that when you are tardy this negates your eligibility for perfect attendance. So, the ante has been upped: not only do you have to attend every day, but attend on time. Surely these are important practical life skills acquisition lessons.

When I learned of the family's disappointment I found myself trying to remember if when I was in elementary school in the early 50's were there ever any incentives for me, like prizes or other forms of recognition, for perfect attendance. I couldn't recall any. What I could recall was simply being expected to be present, and on time, every day.

Several days after this discussion with this parent I was reading in a South Carolina newspaper about state level awards that were being bestowed as a matter of official state policy to perfect attendance students. Now that really got my attention.

Woody Allen's words of wisdom sprung to mind. Showing up is a key to success. But should we be in the business of rewarding people for simply showing up? That, however, is not the question. We are rewarding people for simply showing up. And, no matter how much I acknowledge the importance of being present in order to learn, and to developing an attitude of total family and individual commitment to regular, conscientious school participation, I just can't quite accept the legitimacy of rewarding people for what they ought to do as a given. For me, this strikes me as setting an absolute minimum standard and rewarding the attainment thereof.

As I look to my own career in higher education, I know many of my students expected to be rewarded for simply showing up. While I always took attendance, and penalized students for excessive absences, I did not reward them for perfect attendance. I saw my duty as being to push them beyond minimal standards.

I have long advocated in my work with colleges and universities and their efforts to improve student success, the examination of attendance policies. It is always one of the things I look for as I review college catalogs. There is enormous variety, as one would expect, in such policies. Most leave the matter to the discretion of the faculty member—which I heartily concur with. Very few lay out any consistent policy of expectations with minimum expectations of how many cuts will be allowed. And I have never seen one policy that has a differential level of attendance expectations for first-year students, even though I have long urged consideration of such.

So, do students have to be present to learn? To earn credit? To win? Certainly, we should be talking about this. But in my experience, we avoid this discussion like the plague. It is a sure fire topic to result in raging controversy and differences with the majority of faculty usually coming down strongly that there should be no official policy about attendance, other than they should determine any such standards and expectations. The implicit but almost always unspoken sub text here is they don't want to be in the business of monitoring student attendance because they don't want anyone monitoring theirs. I understand that. I don't want to be monitored either because I self-monitor—exactly what many of our students don't do—and exactly why they need more than minimum standards and expectations.

So what does it say about our culture when people achieve the perception of success by simply showing up? Is this something we should be inculcating in our seven-year olds?

The Commencement Speech as Reflection Tool

6-18-12

My wife and partner of many years, Betsy Barefoot, has been so good for me in that she encourages me to do many things with her that I would never have done without her. The list is too long to enumerate here but my commenting on this is occasioned by one of the things that I do with her that I wouldn't do on my own: attend church (only with her). I was really glad I went on a recent Sunday for the "sermon" was really a commencement speech delivered by a just graduated high school senior who was headed off as a first-year student to the University of Chicago. This homily was delivered at All Souls Episcopal Cathedral in Asheville, North Carolina.

I am a veteran of this writing and speaking genre as I have delivered a number of commencement addresses. The most atypical of them was one I delivered a quarter of a century or so ago in a maximum security prison where the graduating class of seven students included several serving life sentences for murder. They were all students in the University of South Carolina's "Prison College Program." I could not tell them to "go forth"; nor could I tell them that higher education would, literally, "let them be free." But most of the rest of my commencement talks have been of the more conventional form, to graduating college students. Every time I go to write one of these messages I find it a good time for personal reflection on the significance of this rite of passage in the larger context of whatever is going on in the country and world at that given time.

Most educators, of course, don't get to give any commencement addresses, in the formal sense. Yet they could give them in many other contexts to students because they have so many opportunities to dispense wisdom, hope(s), dreams for their students.

I find myself writing blog postings more often that apply to the beginning college experience. But I also have extensive experience developing approaches for colleges and universities to use with departing students in what I came to call in my 1998 book, *The Senior Year Experience*, (published by Jossey-Bass).

The purpose of this blog is to suggest simply as a reflection exercise for any educator the act of writing an outline at least for what you would say to students were you to deliver a commencement address. What do you want for them in life after college? What do you want them to think about their time in college? What kinds of questions should they be asking for their own reflection? What values do you want to espouse for them going forth? What do you want to say to them about the needs of our country right now and how higher education prepared them to meet those larger societal needs? What do you want to say to them about the larger individual and societal questions of purpose—individual and national?

And I don't mean to apply the above questions just to students in the last phase of undergraduate education. I think these "commencement" themes are equally important for beginning students. More than ever I hope we are getting them to focus early and often, like voting in Chicago, on the most fundamental roles and purposes of higher education and how those connect to their individual roles and purposes. Is there anything more important that they could be preparing themselves for than making money and adopting for their total way of life the capitalistic value system that dominates now every aspect of American life? Yes, of course, it is important that they have jobs to repay their student loans. But what else are we preparing them for that might have meaning, value, and powerfully intrinsic self satisfaction. I believe our students are thinking about these things and I only hope we, their guides, mentors, provocateurs, are doing so commensurately.

I also recommend you take in a commencement speech now and then, real time, or simply by reading one—if not the whole text, the excerpts that are summarized in the press, particularly at this time of year. We need to maintain our own practice of active reflection if we are to have the greatest impact on our students.

Joy Kills Sorrow

6-11-12

My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I just spent a week or so at the annual Spoleto Arts Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, a peak yearly experience for us. One of the many events we went to was a concert by the Boston based indie music group, [Joy Kills Sorrow](#). They are, as the local newspaper described them, a "...fusion of folk, blues, and pop..." with "...a woman's touch..." The band's name is taken from a 1930's radio station with call letters WJKS, which played the music of bluegrass legends, the Monroe Brothers. Betsy and I really loved Joy Kills Sorrow and recommend you check them out.

I take my stimuli for inspirations about framing transformative experiences for college students from any sources that occur to and then move me. And this group did. How could we move college students from sorrow to joy? Why would we need to? Because many students do not experience joy in the beginning college experience, especially after reality settles in around mid-terms, or even earlier, and buyer's remorse sets in, and homesickness, frustrated aspirations and very high doses of anxiety. Many first-year students experience a genuine degree of sorrow early in the first term. How could we move them to joy—and not the joy of one good party, but something much more lasting, substantive, and transformative? That is my question.

About two decades ago I discovered a woman who had fairly recent begun teaching at a small, liberal arts college in Ohio, The Defiance College. Because she was new and untenured, one of her appointment conditions was the teaching of that college's first-year seminar. She related to me that she had come to be a college teacher after serving as a psychologist in an inner city Ohio hospital for many years, dealing largely with individuals and families with high levels of anxiety and grief. So she, Dr. Davina Brown, was a self described expert on grieving and how to alleviate it. She knew it when she saw it—or in the case of Defiance College—when she read it. And that was the point she was making to me: as a faculty member in the college success course as she read the required journals submitted by her first-year students, she noted widespread consistent patterns of emotions reflecting grieving—grieving for a lost former life that could never be put back together again. Ironically, she had left her hospital grief counseling work in search of what she thought was a "more normal" population—traditional age college students. And there she found again plenty of grief. I was so moved by her experience that I asked her to write her theory about the first-year grieving process which we published in the [Journal of the First-Year Experience](#).

I invite my readers to accept the assumption that many beginning (and continuing) college students do not experience the "joy" that a good college experience can produce, and, for lots of reasons, experience instead "sorrow."

So what could we do to further increase the probability that our new college students have the kind of experiences that would produce "joy"? I am not seeking a constant state of joy, of course, but mean by this a sense of deep satisfaction, accomplishment, appreciation, affirmation, that is extremely gratifying, enjoyable, and sustainable? Such outcomes would have to come in processes of self-discovery and development, in the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and relationships. And those are what we are responsible for creating and executing. This is another way for me to look at our charge.

An Upside of Higher Education's Tolerance for Idiosyncrasy: Advocacy Flourishes

7-9-12

I have found myself marveling many times after interacting with some academic who is just so idiosyncratic, unusual, strange, that I know would never make it outside the academy, most conventional organizations just would never tolerate the square pegs that wouldn't fit in the round holes. And I find myself saying "thank goodness for the idea of the university" where we overlook many unusual personal qualities and focus on the creative, intellectual, research productivity that is a positive force for good. I remember when I was in the Air Force and how the younger airmen (and women) who were in there escaping the draft and resolving not to make a career of the military would cast dispersions on the non-commissioned officers by describing them as "NCO's"—"not capable outside." Some of the most talented and influential people I have met in the academy are NCO's. And thank goodness for them.

In my line of work, being an advocate for educational innovation and more student -oriented approaches, particularly for low status students like first-year and transfer students, and the educationally and financially disadvantaged students, this basic tolerance of the academy has been an enabler, thank goodness, for it tolerated—actually more than tolerated—it encouraged the eccentrics like me. I often think I would not have made it on the outside, even though I was hard at work on the inside increasing the probability that my students would make it on the outside.

In 1990, my colleagues and I at the University of South Carolina established an annual award for what we called the "Outstanding First-Year Advocate." Each year the USC National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition recognizes 10 such "Outstanding First-Year Advocates." Result: there are now about 250 of them out there on campuses that we have anointed.

It is people like these advocates that remind me how much difference one individual can make. The challenge is to create more of them. They often stand out because they are so alone, there are so few of them, but at least they are tolerated and enabled. Thus the academy's toleration for idiosyncratic behaviors creates the social conditions for such advocacy to flourish.

The moral of this story for me has been to help others use their vision and personal power to take positive advantage of the personal freedom the academy provides. It would be impossible for me to count all the occasions I have seen where it is one key person who is responsible for moving some initiative, idea, advocacy forward. How do we create, encourage, mentor, support, enable such advocates? And then how do we institutionalize their ideas so their work will have legs after they have moved on? This has been one way of framing the challenge of my entire career.

As our society seems to inexorably move on to adopt the values, behaviors, policies, practices of the corporation, I wonder about the academy's long term capacity to continue to enable its innovators, its advocates. If we are not careful, in the name of becoming more "business like" and "running the campus like a business" we may stifle and render obsolete one of our greatest inherent strengths as the primary societal engine of innovation: our tolerance for individual differences that has enabled and sponsored and nurtured and rewarded our innovators, our advocates.

The Grand Divide-What Can We Do To Come Over to the Other Side?

6-28-12

I have no idea how many of my readers know me well enough to know that I am a very secular man and not conventionally religious. I mention this to provide context for what follows here.

Most Sunday's I accompany my wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, to her church, All Souls Cathedral, in Asheville, North Carolina. I enjoy being with her and I have great respect for the priests, their messages, and the all inclusive nature of the congregation—and you all know what that means when I say "all inclusive"!

Last Sunday the priest spoke about the fact that our country has created what he called "The Grand Divide". And he pointed that out to ask what each of us could individually do to "come over to the other side," to reach out to those we know are on the other side of The Grand Divide from us. I just haven't been able to stop thinking about this.

If I were still in charge of a first-year seminar (and I wish I were) and if that seminar were theme based, I think I would choose this theme of "The Grand Divide." Even if you are not teaching this fall an applicable course, what matters is you are working with students, and or our fellow citizens in some way(s). So what could you do with your students, friends, colleagues, to better understand the other side, their concerns, fears, anger, hopes, dreams? What could you be sharing with them about yours? How can you meet them at least half way? How can we be increasing our contact with each other, working together on mutual issues that matter? I am increasingly ready to join many other citizens who have given up on our leaders in Washington to act like adults and focus on the common good. I am about ready to give up on most of them.

What matters is what I do in my own locus of control. We all have locus of control. Somehow we must create models for our students of how adults can live together in civility, each attempting to come over to the other side. I am more committed to this than ever. We have to save ourselves from ourselves.

There Are Lessons from Penn State for All of Us: This Applies to You!

7-11-12

This past week has brought the public release of the investigation conducted by former FBI Director Louis Freeh, of the circumstances regarding the purported assaults on children by former Penn State employee Jerry Sandusky. And it has sent my head spinning. And this is really something given that I thought I had already heard everything. Afterall, I am no stranger to university life in the fast lane where there are powerful forces supporting athletic departments and where the institution has endured a number of athletic scandals. I know that had I not been a tenured, full professor at my university I would have been out on the street in retaliation for taking on the Athletic Department for abuses of my first-year students.

So here's my take on what I have read:

- The University had reasonable suspicion as far back as 1998 to believe that an employee was sexually assaulting children on University property.
- University senior officers as high up as a famous football coach, the athletic director, a vice president, and a president, all had varying degrees of knowledge about the possibility of assaults on children.
- University officers were most concerned about unfavorable publicity that would damage the institution's vaulted reputation of its football program and coach
- University officers would put anything behind protecting the reputation of that coach and football program
- University officers were so concerned about preventing negative publicity in the short run that they overlooked a smoking gun that would damage the reputation of the University for years, decades, to come
- University officers were extraordinarily influenced by the power of a coach
- Even when the house of cards was crumbling the football coach received a contract the likes of which no other university employee could even dream of
- University officers kept the governing board in the dark about an actual problem that threatened the University's sacrosanct reputation
- Protecting the football reputation was more important than protecting children and the University's academic reputation

So this whole sorry mess leaves me with some thoughts and questions, which I believe all of us who work directly with students, and who supervise those who work directly with students should be thinking about very seriously:

- What is our individual responsibility to protect students from any form of inappropriate contact or harassment?
- What do we know about such matters?
- When did we come to know about such matters?
- What have we done with what we know about such matters?
- There are some people in power who take advantage of students.
- They got to be able to do this because they are protected and because people like you and me look the other way.
- Any employee of any college or university is in a position of power to protect and advocate for students/ and—to take inappropriate advantage of students
- Any employee theoretically has more power than a student. Even adjuncts. All of us are in positions of trust and power.

I just can't get it out of my head that all these powerful people took what they thought were appropriate steps to protect a university, not children, to protect that university's reputation

So for what should a university be known?

What is it going to take in the contemporary US culture for a university to be best known for something other than football?

Who's in charge here anyway? What is the most fundamental purpose of great American universities?

Is the Penn State debacle finally the last straw that will help us get our house in order?

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, while you wait for our country to sort out all these larger questions, what are you doing to protect your students?

Penn State Redux: What Students Learn When They See Us Not Doing the Right Thing

7-18-12

I have long believed that students can learn from almost anything they see us educators do. We often create learning experiences for students in contexts we may not have thought of as providing instruction for students. Just think of what Penn State students can be learning right now as they learn what all of us have been learning about how their former leaders dealt with the possibility that a fellow employee might be molesting children on University property.

This has brought back for me one of my most powerful learnings of my own undergraduate years—about how my college president would deal with a student (myself) to protect what he thought was the good reputation of the institution.

The year was 1964 and I had just become the Chair of the Student Judicial Council at my alma mater, a small, liberal arts college in Ohio, Marietta College—the oldest post secondary institution in Ohio, with the 16th oldest Phi Beta Kappa chapter in the country.

I was just starting my senior year of college. And I was a very idealistic, purpose driven young man, who was bound and determined to leave a legacy for his college of creating a truly effective, functioning student judicial system, particularly to promote a higher level of academic integrity.

In order to proceed to adjudicate any individual charged with an offense against the conduct code, permission had to be granted by the College President. In this particular year, a charge was made at the very beginning of the term and I had to take this charge to the College President to secure permission to proceed. When the President learned who the person was who was being charged and the potential visibility such a case could have, he denied my permission to proceed. His reason: he had to protect the reputation of the College because it was about to roll out a major fund raising campaign which the President believed this matter could detract from. In retrospect, while the circumstances were very different from the Penn State case, thank goodness, the scenario bore some similarities. Here was the most senior college officer making a decision to protect the reputation of the institution by attempting to prevent something from becoming public that would detract from the image of the institution he was trying to project.

I remember my astonishment at the candor of the President in the rationale he presented. My initial reaction was to find this hard to believe. But I soon concluded that his position was immovable. There was no way I was going to secure his permission. So I decided to accept this reality and cut the best deal I could as fast as I could, right there on the spot. So I told him that in exchange for my acceptance of his decision (compliance=silence), I wanted his assurance that he would not deny me permission for any future case I brought to him that year. He agreed to the deal I offered. And he honored it. But for the rest of my career as a higher educator, I have never forgotten how this first college president I came to know, protected his institution by overlooking something that I believed violated the most important principles of the institution. What I learned also was how to deal to the best of my abilities with such misuse of power, and the importance of setting the best of examples for my students as they observed how I practiced my craft as a higher education leader.

Give It to Me in One Simple Reply

7-23-12

I am of an age when I remember the call of my youth in my 20's, during the Vietnam anti-war movement (of which I was a participant as an honorably discharged Veteran): "don't trust anyone over 30!" I certainly don't say that now but I do think about generational differences.

One is the discernible preference by our younger colleagues for uncomplicated answers to complicated questions, ones that can be answered in one succinct e-mail message.

I just can't adequately quantify how often this happens to me. Someone writes me a profound question, like "What can I do to improve student retention on my campus?" Or "If you were to help us increase student success, what would you do?" Or "What can your work do to help my campus improve student retention?"

When I get messages like this, I note, of course, the title in the signature block of the sender. And if I note a less than senior rank, or other indicators of status that would suggest the sender is early career rather than late career, I know in advance that I am not going to meet expectations. I know that if I offer an initial response and say something to the effect that "this is really a very profound question you have asked me and it will be difficult for me to answer this in one screen so perhaps we ought to have a phone conversation to talk this through..." I know that I will never satisfy this query. I will never hear from this individual again. There will be no phone conversation. Our younger future leaders don't want to talk. They want to get their answers in very quick, immediate, succinct, uncomplicated, unambiguous terms. They want the answer laid out for them on a website. They want to be able to Google that answer—for they are not really sure what the question should be.

So what can we do about this? How do we buck an incredibly powerful cultural trend, driven by the technological gods that increasingly control our lives?

One way would be for my readers to insist that when they task their subordinates to go out and collect information that they not seek the simple, canned, packaged answer, which now so many corporate service providers are offering the academy. I would hope that older and wiser hands would be mentoring our wonderful next generation leaders to not seek simple answers and to be distrustful of succinct answers to complex questions. Am I hoping for too much?

The internet has certainly liberated us. It has leveled the playing field. I get e-mail messages from people who would never call me? They would never ask me for a face-to-face conversation. This is wonderful in some respects. Yet it insures that what sometimes I have to give is the Cliff's Notes version and I am embarrassed by the superficiality of what I provide. But I have a choice: to respond or not respond. And usually I respond, but almost always knowing that I have not done them or myself justice, intellectually speaking that is.

Let's bring back old fashioned, time tested, real time dialogue. Let's use the telephone more. Or how about an actual honest to goodness sit down conversation? I'm ready, willing, and able.

Let's Hear It for the Completion Agenda

7-25-12

I have been laboring in the vineyard of student retention for four decades. And many times I felt like I was a lone wolf. No one else really seemed to care.

But now things are different. All sorts of people have discovered "the Completion Agenda".

No doubt about it; getting students into college has been replaced as an emphasis by getting students THROUGH college.

Many states now have "Completion Agendas." Our work has truly been discovered by policy makers.

And by foundations, some very powerful, wealthy, and influential foundations, including at least one of those that have supported my work. And they are providing very important support for helping our country's neediest students increase their chances of college degree attainment.

And I am delighted to see that they have joined the club. Now they run the club. And I believe, overall, this is a good thing. Now the previously unsung workers of the completion agenda, the retention agents, are getting their time in the sun.

But I must admit that in reviewing much of the discourse about the completion agenda - we seem to have a new "end" - the end is completion for the sake of completion. But is that really what the proponents intend? Though it may be the consequences of the way they are going about their work.

Is it just a matter of getting people through?

Of credentialing?

What are the most important credentials to have these days? Are they necessarily degrees?

And are those credentials being provided by the traditional providers of credentials: colleges and universities? Not entirely. We know the conversation is shifting to ask whether or not there might be other kinds of providers (like employers) who might provide more valuable forms of credentialing.

But it strikes me that there is now a tremendous hurry. "Time is the enemy of completion" the mantra has become. And, yes, time costs money, and many of our students don't have either time or money.

So some of us find ourselves asking:

- Completion for what?
- What do we want our students to be learning?
- What is the value added, besides the credential?
- What do we want them to know and to be able to do?
- And not just in the cognitive domain but in affective domain and life skills as well.

I hope that college will always be more important than simply for finishing. That what is learned will really matter. But I am not so sure any more.

Perhaps the question has always been: "Education for what?"

It certainly is that now more than ever.

Let's work together to lay out a vision for that question. As is so often the case in life: the questions are more important than the answers.

What Have You Accomplished?

7-30-12

I had a father-in-law for many years who was one of the most satisfied and content people I have ever met. There were many reasons for this, and one of the most explanatory I believe was that every day he labored he knew very clearly, with absolute certainty, what he had accomplished.

My mind works in funny ways my readers will say, just as theirs do too. But I am thinking in the period of this writing about what I have accomplished. This is prompted by the fact that in a few days I will deliver a commencement address to the graduating students at the university where I worked full-time for over thirty years, and where I still have an appointment, as an elder statesman, "Senior Fellow" (the University of South Carolina). The University is also conferring on me an honorary degree. It will be one of those rare occasions when I will see my whole former life flash before me. This is a really big deal given the rarity of institutions taking such actions towards their employees. The recognition has everything to do with the importance the University assigns to the work I did there as one of a cast of literally, thousands. I know what I accomplished, and every aspect of this was done through others. We all shared a common vision about the importance of new students and in relentlessly striving to make our university the most first-year student friendly higher education institution in the world.

Unfortunately, for many people it is not so clear what they accomplish and where they fit into a larger vision of redeeming social value. That brings me back to my father-in-law.

His name was Edgar "Sonny" Powers. And he was for me an all American story of The Greatest Generation. Drafted in the US Army during World War II and plucked out of his small, rural, South Carolina town of about 3000, off he went first to train with "Yankees" and eat their food (lamb, which he found a very strange meat whom the teasing "Yankees" told him was really "goat" meat), then to be shipped overseas with The Greatest Generation. He ended up driving a fuel tanker truck across France and Germany in Patton's fabled Third Army and living to tell about it. When he got back home he married and bought a home on his richly earned GI bill, with a payment of \$47.00 a month, where he lived until the day he died in his small South Carolina town. In addition to being in the National Guard, which he loved (that was in the era when the standing army got shipped overseas on deployments, not the Guard), other than his wife and two girls, his other all consuming love was the art and craft of carpentry. He used to say "if it's made out of wood, show me a picture and I'll jump right on it." The reference was to home building. For the next 40 years he worked every day, by the hour, never bidding on jobs, building absolutely beautiful homes with his own hands. Farmers and their families would wait years for their turn to have him build a home for them, paying with what was known in the rural South Carolina countryside as "cash money." Every day he knew what he had done. He knew he had made somebody, most commonly the woman of the house, extremely happy that day. I would go over to visit him every few months and we would go out on a tour of his handiwork. He was rightfully as proud of his work as I am mine. He never could understand my work because he couldn't "see" it. And one of my two sons follows in his footsteps, and has the same level of satisfaction.

I assume that the majority of my readers are higher educators; why else would they be reading me? I wonder what the majority of them do each day to reflect on what they did that day that mattered, made a difference...? How do we "see" what we have done? By looking very carefully. By just asking ourselves and others. By soliciting feedback. By working with and through others they will let you know how you are doing and what you have done.

As Others See Us

8-2-12

I am the founder of an international conference series, the International Conference on The First-Year Experience. Beginning in the summer of 1986, these meetings have continued with the 25th anniversary meeting just concluded in Vancouver. As many of my readers will know, this meeting is part of a larger series hosted by the University of South Carolina, which have drawn over 125,000 higher educators since their founding in 1982. This international meeting is my favorite of the genre.

Why? Because of the richness and diversity of perspectives. The views expressed by educators from countries other than the US always succeed in getting me to take another look at some of our and my own practices and beliefs.

Case in point: yesterday, I received an e-mail from one of the participants at this most recent international conference. It is highly unlikely that any of the Americans, except maybe me, would have written the following, but I assure you I didn't:

".....I regard my duty for my students as the most serious job because I have great responsibility for them and for the society they belong to.

I have been concerned on the recent trend of the education in US..... Somehow the educational goal in the States seems to aim at the maximum superficial pleasure and money. It would be not too wrong if we call the football the god of america. it is sad. I worry that that aim, if it is indeed is the actual appearance in the education, would never last or sustain. The society would be broken sooner or later. The history have been said so, and it will, i believe.

Maybe the talks on education emphasized too much on educational engineering, while too little is mentioned on the goal, or the spirit. We may win a battle or two, while losing the war. Hope we would allocate proper portion to seek the reason why we endeavor for."

It is highly unlikely the writer of the above observation is a reader of my blog and hence would have seen my recent several pieces about the travesty of institutional priorities at Penn State University where football truly was the ruling "god." As a person who detests football and everything it has come to stand for in our culture (organized, rationalized, sanctioned male violence; competitiveness exalted at all costs; male values run amok; commercialism trumping all other values encouraged by sports; subordination of women as sex objects as manifested by the "cheerleaders"; the use of Christianity to invoke and bless ritualistic violence—etc, etc) I couldn't agree more.

The need for outside perspectives to help us better "see" our own culture, in my case especially our higher education culture, is, of course, another argument for the value of foreign travel and study for our students. In my own case, I was fortunate to live in Canada for five years as a child when my father's employer moved him and his family to live in that wonderful country.

At one of our international FYE conferences, about twenty years ago, I attended a session done by an academic administrator from an institution that used to be known as Arctic College. Built below the tundra line and in topography with coniferous trees, the Canadian government was attempting to bring the modern world through higher education to the Inuit peoples who would be flown, literally, by the government, hundreds of miles south from the vast tundra regions of the Northwest Territory, to this new postsecondary opportunity. But they didn't stay long. They left in droves, literally sickened by their new settings. As the officials assessed why this educational experiment had been a disaster in terms of retention and completion, they came to realize that the students were not accustomed to having anything obstruct their literal vision, coming from the flat, wide open tundra enabling them to see as far as humanly possible, daylight hours permitting. In their new setting they felt hemmed in and were having panic attacks in this claustrophobia inducing artificially imposed environment. As I thought about this unique educational experiment and the students' reactions, I realized that unless I had been educated to see those trees through the eyes of those students, that had I visited Arctic College, I would have seen those trees very differently, just as I do the trees surrounding the mountain top in the eastern US where I live and write such musings.

So, the challenge for all of us needs to be to see the trees through eyes other than our own. To do that it helps to be able to interact with higher educators from cultures who can inform us “as others see us.”

What Do Our Leaders Really Believe In?

8-11-12

Forgive me readers, I have multiple strands running through my head and fingers but I think/hope they all connect.

I woke up this morning to the announcement of Mitt Romney's selection of Paul Ryan as his running mate.

And that reminded me of the important question: what do our leaders (of the country, of higher education, of our campuses) really believe? And why don't they take a stand and tell us clearly?

And that reminded me of why I get so much reaction when I usually never fail to mention in my own speeches that most fundamentally my work is about social justice.

There are few things I know with certainty but one is that Paul Ryan does not stand for "social justice" as the term has been conventionally used for the last fifty years in American history and politics—that is unless we mentally qualify and redefine social justice to mean that for conservatives and the very wealthy who want even more tax breaks than they now receive.

Like many American voters, I have been asking myself for some time: what does Mitt Romney really believe in? He has finally given us an answer. It is clear. It is unambiguous. But it doesn't really mean or reveal what he believes in other than he believes Mr. Ryan is his best chance to increase his chances of electability. There is no doubt, however, of what Mr. Ryan believes in and the consistency of those beliefs.

When I go to events like high school reunions and meet people I have known for over fifty years, and now see them on the downside of life, in their capstone periods, I marvel at how unchanged their basic characters and values are from those I knew in adolescence. So what does this say about the man who would be President and who created Romneycare and now wants to repeal Obamacare? It says we don't really know what the guy believes in. But not Paul Ryan. We know what he believes in.

For the past 18 months or so, ever since my wife and I returned from our first visit to South Africa, where we constantly heard the phrase "social justice" being used to justify or remind of why certain educational practices and policies were being pursued, I have deliberately been reminding my own audiences of how social justice is the guiding intellectual construct for my own work. And it never fails that I have people either comment directly to me afterwards or write me, how much they appreciate the clarity of my expressed values and the fact that I would say this at all in an era when none of our elected officials dare call for this.

And this reminds me of how most of my fellow higher educators work on campuses where many of them do have fine leaders, who—unlike the Presidential candidate above, do have a consistent record of core values. But we don't usually hear of them, especially if they are liberal values. We know our leaders are scared to death to espouse such values publicly for whom they might offend, whose money and political support they need. So instead of being able to hear their values espoused, campus personnel have to watch very carefully the decisions their leaders make, especially about allocations of resources to read the tea leaves in our leaders' cups. People in any group want their leaders to stand for something. I am saddened that so many of our educational leaders today correctly have concluded they cannot be so transparent.

What Would Your College/University Have to Do...to Have This Effect?

8-14-12

Recently, on a professional trip, I found myself in a small city, Parkersburg, West Virginia, which is on the banks of the beautiful Ohio River. I was there visiting a unique institution, West Virginia University Parkersburg. After a very early dinner meeting I found myself more or less “free” for the evening and I realized I was being subjected to a powerful emotionally magnetized force pulling me up the River, literally. For, you see, Parkersburg is just 12 miles down the river from Marietta, Ohio, where, once I got past the disaster of my first term of college, I spent an idyllic (or at least that’s the way I remember it) 3.5 more years in undergraduate school—at Marietta College. I just couldn’t be that close and not take a quick run up the road and have a look.

I reflect on this often, namely, the enormous draw, the power of the pull, back to alma mater, the beyond rational reverence I have for whatever alma mater stands for. What happened to me there? What did that place do for me? Of course, I know full well. There is no doubt in my mind about the impact of my college experience.

And this is why I am drawn, back again and again and again. For twelve years I went three times a year as a trustee. And then I realized that I had spent three times the length of my undergraduate education and donated far more in money than my original education had cost. It was time to move on. I often regret that as mentally I haven’t moved on.

So what’s the draw? This is the place where the person I came to be as an adult, came to be.

This is where I learned, developed my core set of values, particularly those about my country, politics, religion.

This is where I tested my character.

This is where I discovered what I could learn, do and who I am. This is where I was born.

This is where I was at peace.

This is where I made the most important intellectual discoveries of my life. This is where I became intellectually liberated.

This is where I unlearned my domestically acquired prejudices.

This is where I acquired some life long powerful friendships—as in with one friend that I still converse with weekly even though he lives 600 miles away from me.

This is where I prepared for my eventual profession: that of higher education change agent. This is where I discovered the mind body connection and why I still run two miles a day.

This is where I acquired a number of my adult behaviors like reading The New York Times, every day, 365 days a year.

This is where I did not join a fraternity even though my father really wanted me to do so.

This is where I gave up being a varsity athlete to be a serious student but I still quote my crew coach almost every day (positively and affectionately).

Four Sure Fire Ways to Kill a Conversation about Innovation and Change

8-17-12

Twice this week I have had the privilege of advising groups of higher educators at two different colleges on processes for effective self study leading to improved institutional effectiveness.

While these were two very different institutional cultures and situations I found myself giving the same counsel in one respect, and that has to do with this suggestion. Specifically, group process like this will move ahead much more productively, collegially, and efficiently, if the group will adopt as ground rules the agreement that no member will say the following things which are sure fire ways to shut down, redirect, stifle delay, frustrate an otherwise positive change process:

1. Oh, we could never do that, because institutions like us do not do that...
2. Oh, we could never do that because we tried that before and it didn't work...
3. Oh, we could never do that because we can't afford it...
4. Oh, we could never do that because—so and so (an influential) would never allow that...

I am sure the above list is not a comprehensive one for conversation and progress killers. But, hopefully, the above list will get you recalling your own and you can build on my list. The main thing is to nip in the bud defeating mechanisms like the above utterances. This will increase your success in getting good ideas out on the table for consideration and then adoption by all.

What Will They Amount To?

8-29-12

Several weeks ago I had one of the peak experiences of my life, the opportunity to deliver the Commencement address at the university which has been my employer since 1967. The caption beside my name in the program read: "acclaimed educator, distinguished public speaker..." I confessed to the graduating class that my public speaking career had been launched with only one formal preparation experience and that was the Introduction to Public Speaking course that I took in my freshman year of college. And I told them my grade was a "D", which was the first of many gifts I received from my college professors. I'm sure my speech professor had no idea what I would amount to. And neither did I.

So, for all my readers that are starting out another year of higher education, or others in analogous situations where you have a new "crop" of entrants of unknown quality and potential, let me urge you to suspend judgment. You just never know how these people are going to turn out. I have always tried to tell myself that my classes are/were always full of people just like I was. Not exactly a tabula rasa, but still, with enormous unmet potential.

I believe these entering occasions are ones for redemption. I was redeemed in my Speech 101 class. My professor called me aside near the end of the term and asked me if I would like the opportunity to do extra credit work so that I could receive a D for the course---otherwise I would receive the grade of F. I didn't have to think about the choice long, and leapt at the chance. The extra work involved reading two books, which the professor selected for me and on which he told me he would give me an oral examination. So if you could give a student only one book to read to redeem him/herself, what would it be?

In my case I had overcut the class, a total of six cuts. Not very smart John. I was in college in southern Ohio, about 600 miles from my home in Connecticut. And I had cut both a Friday and a Monday class three times in order to go back east to see my girlfriend for whom I was terribly homesick. She didn't make me do this. I was the "decider."

So what books was I given in this exercise of reading as punishment? 1) David Riesman's classic 1954 book The Lonely Crowd. The professor wanted me to think about whether or not I was an "inner directed" or "outer directed" person as described by Professor Riesman. I really thought about this a lot and realized I was definitely an inner-directed person. Exactly 30 years later I had the privilege of interviewing Professor Riesman along with my now wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, and we published that interview.

2) The other book was Erich Fromm's classic Escape from Freedom. My prof wanted me to think about what Fromm labeled the "burden" of freedom and what were the uses I was putting to my gift from the college of freedom.

And I think that remains the single greatest challenge for beginning college students today: the uses they make of their freedom. And I recommend that as a time-tested theme for use in first- year seminar courses.

Let me return to where I started this posting with: your newest cohort will include some very unlikely candidates for success. Can you even begin to pick out who will receive an honorary degree for something 51 years later when the jury is finally in? I think you have to look at each person as a potential 51 year later honoree. We get what we predict. We get what we develop. We get what we deserve.

Reflections of a Departing Vacationer

8-31-12

Once a year I take a New England vacation with my wife, Betsy Barefoot. We depart on the eve of Labor Day weekend and this is the only vacation of the year I try to go cold turkey and totally unplug. While I love staying in touch with an extraordinary range of people, I look forward to my annual untethering.

We go the Berkshire Mountains in western, Massachusetts and have family reunions with my brother and sister. We see outstanding summer stock theater in Lennox and Stockbridge; and a concert at Tanglewood. Then we move on up to Vermont to an idyllic inn on Lake Champlain, for hikes, and more live theater. And the capstone of the vacation is several days in a rural Quebec “manoir” where the cuisine is known in the indigenous parlance as “gastronomique.” We have a pact to treat ourselves to at least one Canadian vacation a year—this will actually be our second this year. What a relief to be in North America but in a context with universal health care, strict gun control, low crime, and lack of dysfunctional political divisiveness.

As I head out and write on the way, I am, as usual, reflecting on things, what do they mean to me and what I am going to do with myself made meanings. That’s what I learned to do in my liberal arts college education over four decades ago.

I reflect back on my 32+ years of NOT being able to start a vacation on Labor Day weekend because I was tied to the traditional college semester system and couldn’t leave my students. I miss them now, terribly, but do enjoy the freedom of being able to take vacations in the so-called “shoulder” seasons, crowds are down, children back in school, weather still gentle and appealing.

Why are we still starting school in mid to late August to September? Because we always have. This is truly a vestigial artifact left over from an agrarian past. In my day job right now I am providing advice through our self study process, Foundations of Excellence®, to a publicly traded university (with 120,000 on-line students) that has a fall start, once a month, every month of the year. This makes a great deal of sense to me for lots of reasons. Most importantly, it avoids the August train wreck where we make so many mistakes with students that they are doomed to failure even before they start.

Since I became a blogger, albeit an occasional one at that, that status has affected the way I “look” literally at whatever I am seeing on vacation. Being a blogger has turned me into a reporter of sorts. I find I am constantly vigilant to things I might want to report on, especially when I am out of the country.

I think it would be a good idea if more of my fellow higher ed change agents were bloggers. It might make them more observant of their higher ed settings, force them to try to be more objective and somewhat more detached from what they are observing.

For this trip I head from my predominantly red state into two blue states, very blue states. I know I will note differences. At least North Carolina where I live is not as red as South Carolina where I spent three wonderful decades as a higher educator. But I am confident that what I will see will not turn me red!

One year when we were visiting our favorite inn in the world, where we now headed for in Vermont, we met a whining couple from South Carolina, who owned an outdoor advertising sign company in South Carolina. They were not happy in Vermont where such abominations are banned. They tried to persuade me that the absence of such signage was a tremendous disservice to citizens “because you don’t know which exit to get off the Interstate for a McDonalds.” State level public policy does make a difference.

"I Shall Not Tell A Lie"

9-2-12

For many of us Americans, I suspect the biggest outcome of the recently completed Republican national convention is to get us to think about the ubiquity of not telling the truth. And this leads me, predictably, to mentally link this to the environment where I have spent most of my adult life: college and university campuses.

Sure, we all know politicians must lie, distort, prevaricate, dissemble, obfuscate, exaggerate to some degree. But what is so stunning is the extent of intentional fabrication, distortion,--outright lying that we have all just been treated to. And it's not like the people telling the lies are stupid. No, these are very, very smart people, with world class educations, obtained at world class American universities, I am sorry to note. Even for those of us who may be the most cynical observers of our political process, the amount of lying we have just heard and read is truly remarkable.

It's like the Fourth Estate has just woken up to the extent of this phenomena. It's about time. If they don't protect our democracy who or what will? College professors are trying but we aren't enough. And we are under attack from the right too as our budgets have been slashed. I find noteworthy in the few days after the convention ended, the extent of press reporting on the falsehoods uttered by the party aspiring to be completely in power, with the poster leader liar being the Vice Presidential candidate, a very bright thinker we all agree.

The stage managers of these messages must be assuming that the only truly undecided voters left are just truly so stupid, uninformed, uneducated, able to be manipulated, that truth telling is not something they need to offer.

Didn't these all American guys learn from their parents the fable about George Washington being asked by his father if he cut down a prize cherry tree, and the son, our first President, confessing: "I cannot tell a lie." I learned this. And now that's what I want to hear more of in our country: "I cannot tell a lie." I still want this even though I learned in a college American history course that the cherry tree tale was just that, a fable, introduced into a much later edition of a multi-edition series of biographies by one of Washington's early biographers, Parson Weems.

Maybe it's just that we all know that we are constantly being lied to by organizations and individuals using the media to get their message across. We are inured to this. We just have all given up on any expectation that we will be told the truth.

When I was a college freshman in my first term I overcut my Speech 101 class. And as a "gift" from my professor he offered me the privilege to receive a final D for the course if I would read two books for extra credit and submit to an oral examination on reading. One of the books, was authored by the German psychoanalyst and historian, Erich Fromm, [Escape From Freedom](#). It was a perfect choice for a seventeen year old, counter dependent male like me. I was abusing my freedom. Fromm's concern though had not been with immature college freshmen. It had been with why the most literate democracy in Europe, the Weimar Republic in the early 1930's (with a higher rate of literacy than we have now in the US) had nevertheless voluntarily voted to have a dictatorship, to give up its freedom for the promised security and return to greatness. Sound familiar?

While I was in college, I studied European history and how the Nazi's perfected the communication of what became known as the Big Lie (that the economic troubles of Germany were to be explained by a Jewish conspiracy). The Big Lie was the most successful propaganda accomplishment in history. It was repeated often enough that ordinary Germans ultimately came to believe this total fabrication. We Americans were treated at the Republican convention to a number of big lies. And they were repeated

again and again.

Oh, If Only We Didn't Have to Change!

9-11-12

This is another post written while on vacation. For exactly ten years my wife and I have made an annual return vacation to a Vermont inn on Lake Champlain, that permits me at least to return to a time pre-email. This lovely inn was built in 1888 and is furnished in period antiques. There are no televisions or radios in the rooms. There are phones in the rooms, and this year only for the first time in ten years, there is in-room internet access, which I have not availed myself of. It is such a welcome relief to untether. This place is so remote there is also no cellular service. Heavenly!

There are so many reasons why we like returning here each year. The most important reason is that the place does not change. In a world when there is ever less predictability, it is wonderful to return to anyplace that is not changing. We count on that. We look forward to it. We celebrate it. And it harkens back to more than a century ago, a time I did not experience, but I feel I would have felt at home in. And I like, if only in a small, almost fantasy part of my life, no change. This is in total contrast to the rest of my professional year when I am promoting change in order to improve student performance in the beginning college experience.

We came here for the first time the year after 9/11. On 9/11, 2001, we had been on "holiday" with a British couple, dear friends of ours, in France, chilling out in Provence. After a day's outing and our return to our lovely rented cottage, sitting on an outdoor patio drinking wine, our sense of tranquility was interrupted forever by the news of the attacks on the World Trade Center. My first thought, I hate to admit it, was not for the thousands who had just died, but for the millions of us who survived, but who would be profoundly affected by the decisions made by the US President, the "decider", as he so fondly referred to himself. All I could think was "No way this man, of all the possible leaders we could have had, can possibly grasp the intellectual complexities of what has just happened to us." Sadly, I was proven right. And for the next decade we have chosen not to be out of the country on the anniversary of 9/11.

This year, we will be in Quebec, staying at another place that does not seem to change, a rural French Canadian "manoir". I had five wonderful years as a child living in Canada and we return each year for at least one vacation in this safe and sane country. This is exactly the kind of culture I would like my students to experience just for the sake of contrast.

In spite of my vacation preferences, I really am a person who advocates change and walks his talk. I know that higher education must change. The present ways we are doing business are just not sustainable. We can't continue to afford the current delivery models. And many of these models just aren't working very well, especially, the default public policy access point: the American community colleges, where the failure rates of students in college parallel programs is simply unacceptable. The reasons for that are a whole separate story, one I must be talking about increasingly in my public addresses.

Several months ago I was having a conversation with a senior program officer of a major American foundation. We were discussing this foundation's investment policy with respect to a particular institutional type in American higher education: private, liberal arts colleges. And the officer was explaining to me why his/her particular foundation is reluctant to make investments in this sector of American higher education, our oldest sector: "those people just want us to give them money so they don't have to change!"

Upon reflection, and in fairness, I concluded this could really be said of most of us. Most of us would like to have the infusion of new financial resources to prevent change. We would like to sustain the present, even though it isn't working very well. Basically, what this means is that we would like to have an infusion of grants to enable us to sustain the status quo. The grants permit us to undertake new work and thus to preserve existing resources to protect our current institutionalized ways of doing business. How often I have seen colleges and universities, in my area of work, secure external grants to undertake new initiatives to improve first-year student success. When they get new resources to implement new approaches it means they are spared having to reallocate and hence we get to maintain the status quo a little bit longer. I know that this is not a sustainable model.

I see this constantly in my domain of higher education work. Institutions get grants to ramp up developmental education, initiate or refine first-year seminars, launch learning communities, implement Supplemental Instruction, etc. What they are doing, of course, is exactly what they should have been doing on existing resources and not seeking new resources. But I get it: this protects us from having to change the basic ways we organize our

colleges and universities. First-year programs are really ancillary, funded on temporary monies, and the status quo doesn't have to change. I am reminded again, that institutions always find the money to do what they most value. And what they value most is maintaining the status quo. I understand this. I am the guy who likes to vacation in places that remind me of what it used to be like to take a vacation a century ago. But I also am always ready to return to, look forward to returning to, the important work of change agency to help our higher education system make the changes it must make, because it cannot escape, unlike me, the changes being thrust upon it.

Quiet Please: Student Thinking Space

9-12-12

I am writing this posting during my annual fall vacation (with my wife, Betsy Barefoot) in New England. I have noted to myself that it is noteworthy that two of the three places we will be staying over two weeks have banned cellular access (Stockbridge, MA, and Shelburne, VT). This really facilitates my aspiration to be as unplugged as possible.

When I am on vacation, my favorite way to explore new terrain is by jogging. I am particularly drawn to places of quiet and absence of vehicular traffic. Cemeteries are often a good bet, really peaceful places for contemplation while moving. My two favorites in New England are in Stockbridge and Lenox, MA. I had a favorite in college too, in my college town of Marietta, Ohio: the Mound Cemetery, named for a prehistoric Indian mound around which more Revolutionary war soldiers and officers are buried than any cemetery in the country.

While jogging in the cemetery in Stockbridge I was thinking about all the efforts on American college campuses to teach "thinking skills", especially "critical thinking" and "reflection." We are investing much institutional energy into faculty development to enable our professoriate to teach these prized skills. But there in the graveyard it occurred to me that we are not remotely investing our own thinking, time, energy, and resources into creating more ideal places for students to think.

So what if we created zones, spaces, specifically designated for thinking? Isn't this what colleges and universities are supposed to be all about—thinking? Thinking that leads to discovery, research, publication, dissemination, replication, adoption, emulation, and redeeming social value? Or thinking that lead to entertainment? Or problem solving? Or decision making? Or epiphany?

Walk around any campus in America in search of good places for thinking. Good luck. The people who manage many campus residence halls want as much space as possible to be revenue generating space. Not space solely for quiet and reflection.

Can you imagine as part of orientation a student walking tour, led by influential peer leaders, showing the novitiates the best places for solitude and thinking?

Student unions also place a premium on revenue generating space. And after that comes meeting space. Where would thinking space fit into that facility?

There are about 2000 public colleges and universities and most of them do not have non-denominational chapels. Too bad. Those places are rarely used, and hence are great places for thinking.

What about outdoor space? I have visited a number of commuter campuses where there is no outdoor space for congregating, let alone solitary thinking. We wonder why commuter students don't hang out more on campus? No surprise. We have created a self fulfilling prophecy. We don't make staying on campus inviting and so students don't stay.

And what about libraries? When I learned that President Kennedy was shot on that Friday afternoon, November 22, 1963, all I could think of was that I needed to find a quiet place to think. The first place that occurred to me was the College library. And it was soon deserted. A perfect choice. My usual first choice in the library was the rare book room. There was almost never any other student in there, just an occasional professor pursuing his/her monastic lifestyle, which I did not know yet would be my chosen life too.

Mystery Shopping: What does it Cost?

9-16-12

This posting is about “mystery shopping”, vacation hobbies, a “busman’s holiday”, and college cost!

One of the wonderful things about vacations is that you, ideally, have opportunities to do things you don’t do in your more normal work routines. My wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, and I have just had several weeks of vacation and we took the opportunity to do something we enjoy doing occasionally: mystery shopping a college campus! This is, if you will, a kind of busman’s holiday.

Betsy and I have visited approximately 700 different college and university campuses in our more than sixty years of combined work in the academy. One result of this is that we can case them out pretty fast. I find, not surprisingly, that my level of objectivity about any institution is greatest just before I enter the place. And the very first few minutes after I arrive on campus my objectivity begins to fade as my impressions begin to form.

Sometimes when Betsy and I are driving somewhere in the country (especially ours but internationally as well), and we spot a sign directing us to a campus we have never visited, we will simply follow whatever routing is available to the place, drive on, and the mystery shopping begins.

On our most recent vacation, we visited three states (New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont) and one Canadian province, Quebec. And we mystery shopped one institution, which led me to think about college cost.

Dear reader, I trust you are familiar with the concept of “mystery shopping.” It is a practice whereby someone poses as a customer, client, which he/she is really not. Instead, the mystery shopper is pretending to be a customer or client but is really trying to learn how the organization being “shopped” treats its customers/clients. Usually, the goal of this is to either gain information on a competitor, or gain information that can be used to make your own organization more effective. It is, ultimately a form of an “audit” of your organization functioning.

So in our case, on the busman’s holiday, how does this work?

Well, even before you get to the campus, you look for directional signage or other indications in the community that might point you to the campus. At the very least, this gives you some clues as to how connected the campus is to its host community.

Ok, you’ve found the campus. You drive into the place.

What about the signage (tasteful, tacky, conspicuous, whatever)?

What kind of “feel” do you get as you enter?

What about the landscaping and immediate appearance? Quality of the paving?

How do you rate the signage?

What are your initial impressions of the level of maintenance of the place? How much deferred maintenance is immediately visible?

Do you note the presence or absence of trash/graffiti?

What evidences of the student culture are immediately apparent that might differentiate the place from a corporate campus?

Can you draw any inferences from the makes and models of the automobiles that you see in lots designated for students?

What evidences of new construction do you see?

Are there students in evidence? How do they look? Who is hanging out with whom?

Are there any areas set aside outside for gathering, community (most fundamentally seating!)?

How easy is it to find the Admissions' Office, signage, visitor parking? Is your sense that Admissions is in high or low rent space?

You walk in the Admissions office. How are you greeted? And by whom? How is the place furnished, decorated? What is displayed? Highlighted? What kind of feel do you get?

OK, so I walked in the Admissions' Office of the place we most recently mystery shopped. I'll give you one clue: This is a public four-year, residential, institution.

I asked the receptionist if I could have some literature. She cheerfully and politely indicated "certainly." She did not ask me anything about the purpose of my visit or if she could provide anything else, was I visiting on behalf of a family member, what.

I thanked her and left and shortly thereafter reviewed the five different pieces of literature she provided me. Not a word about cost in any of these pieces. That really struck me. Was the idea to get me interested enough to make me want to then dig for the information on cost? What did the creators of this literature think: their prospective students were living on trust funds?

For years, when I am visiting, speaking, on a campus, I have often asked audiences how many of them can quote me with reasonable accuracy the current tuition rates for full-time students (in-state if the institution is public). Rarely do I ever find that even a third of the audience can do so.

Of more concern is the response to an even more important question I am fond of asking: "What is the median level of indebtedness of your most recent graduating class?" To that I rarely ever have anyone who can tell me.

I have to ask, is making it more challenging for prospective students to determine our pricing structure really in our best interests? And, more importantly, is it in our students' best interests?

Why don't more of us know what it costs our students for the privilege of being our students? Why don't we know how much they are working? How much are families struggling to make the student's presence possible? How much are our students borrowing? And at what interest levels, terms and periods of repayment?

What should we think about the fact that some many of us just seem oblivious to these questions? It has to be more than "this is just the way it is."

I understand why Congress is paying more attention to college costs. And I predict that no matter who wins the upcoming elections, we are going to see more attention paid to these related questions. It cannot remain business as usual.

And I recommend you consider doing your own mystery shopping, especially at your own institution.

Transfer Student Experience Déjà Vu

9-26-12

I share some reflections of déjà vu that are arising of the significant amount of work I am doing these days on improving the transfer student experience. My déjà vu comes from my strong sense that I have been through this before—only with respect to my push beginning forty years ago exactly to improve our country's "first-year experience." There are many parallels, and differences. I am not even tempted to use the trite and overworked contemporary phrase, which I abhor, "been there, done that." In part, that's because I have not "done" this yet to the extent I have the first-year experience.

The transfer student experience is now the normative one in American higher education. According to our government, some 62% of currently baccalaureate degree seeking students have transcripts from more than one institution. You are in a distinct (and surely privileged) minority if you go one place, stay there for the entire BA—as I did and so many other leaders of the academy.

Big problem: our two main levels of higher education, two year and four year, were not really designed to do transfer. Now we are asking them to accommodate students' mobility patterns for which they, the institutions, were never intended to handle. Even though I had assumed that community colleges were designed to provide "transfer", the more I have worked with them, the more I have realized that for most this is not a primary mission (instead, developmental education, job training, technical/vocational education are primary).

The non-profit organization which I lead provides a process to help colleges and universities improve their transfer student sending and receiving functions. It is from this work that I offer the following observations.

1. The first step in improving the first-year experience was simply getting educators to talk about it, not take it for granted.
2. The second and related step was to increase the perceived importance of the particular student transition—importance to the students especially, but also to institutional viability and the national interest.
3. Simultaneously, it helped to argue that in some ways first-year students were being discriminated against—they generated far more in funding than was allocated to their care and feeding. They were cash cows for redirected resources to other educational activities deemed more valuable, especially instruction at the upper division and graduate levels. This meant they received differential treatment, and not favorably so.
4. In order to improve the attention paid to first-year students we needed "advocates", champions. And the first-year experience movement went to great and specific lengths to institutionalize this practice—note the USC National Resource Center's more than two decades long practice of recognizing, celebrating "outstanding first-year advocates."
5. Attention to first-year students also improved when we developed more "owners" of them, i.e. heads of special units and programs whose institutionalized role it was to champion the needs of such students. Now the institutional practices for such special units and programs are legion. That's a good thing. But therein lies the rub for transfers: other than the Enrollment Management professionals who process their entry into the institution, transfer students generally lack "owners" and "advocates" at the institutional level. And hence, the treatment of these students varies enormously in the cottage industry culture of decentralized upper divisions. In some units these students are treated well, in others they are invisible, or worse.
6. Another component that helped move the first-year success needle was the development of some very successful "programs", interventions, strategies, targeting first-year students, most notably, the first-year seminar. There has been no such magic bullet put in place for transfers.
7. When we got serious about focusing on the needs of first-year students we became willing to make certain interventions for them mandatory, such as first-year seminars, orientation, advising. But, to date most institutions are reluctant to take this step.
8. In order to improve first-year student success, we assumed that the students would be willing to get involved in the interventions we offered them. So we offered the interventions. With transfers, we are not looking at a self-fulfilling prophecy—just the opposite in fact. Many institutions assume that transfer students will NOT participate and hence they don't offer what they assume those students will not participate in—e.g. special orientation. This becomes then a negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

9. To serve first-year students we had to better understand them, who they were, their characteristics, needs, problems, challenges, hopes, dreams, fears. We have done a much better job at this than applying the same lens of focus on our transfer students. I find that most institutions I am working with on this issue initially are woefully ignorant of the realities of this population. Prejudice and under attention are common results.

I could continue. But, by now you get the point. There is much we can learn with how we became so successful in convincing the academy to pay more attention to first-year students with the current challenge of giving equal time to transfers. We will never significantly increase baccalaureate degree attainment until we do so. This is a work in progress. I am glad to be part of it. As we have come to say about the first year, "the first year matters." So does this alternative, newer first year.

Higher Educators Going Back to Class

10-1-12

There are moments when I would like to think that every college and university has got their first-year seminar down pat. After all, this course genre has been around since 1982. But, not at all. This course type is so dynamic that many institutions are constantly rethinking this course, as they should be.

The course should be a metaphor for the larger host institution. The course should change as the country changes, the students change, the institution changes. This is so because this is the one course in the curriculum that is all about both the institution and the student—their interface and what happens or can happen when you put the two together. I rarely see an institution go about this rethinking process with sufficient intentionality.

I have recently come to observe one university's approach to first-year seminar redesign. This is Missouri State University West Plains. How are they approaching this? They are sending their faculty and staff back to class to redesign the class. What does this mean?

It means that first of all, the University appointed a task force that will spend an entire academic year redesigning this course. Who's on the task force? Faculty, librarian, student affairs, admissions, IT, advising staff, academic department chairs, an instructional designer, the current course leader, an IR professional, the current course director, and Title III staff, 17 people all together. An ideal size group for expertise and multiple perspectives, balance.

And how have they organized this process? Well, just like a class. Actually, it is more like a seminar. I would define a seminar as a learning group where all members are more or less equal in their influence on the rest of the group. All members are to be teachers of the group. All members are learners. All get to speak. They have a syllabus. They have a convener. They have a set of questions they are pursuing on topics they have decided they want to learn more about. They have collected a treasure trove of resource literature. They have made each other assignments. Each will teach all what was learned in the homework. They have created an intentional division of labor with specialized responsibilities. They will also visit some other institutions to observe alternative models. And they are going to several national conferences to further their learning.

They have decided to have fun in the learning process. Each one listens politely to the rest of the group members. And they are punctual and willing to honor the value of each other's time by showing up on time, and getting right down to business. And they are being paid a stipend for taking this task so seriously. How's that for a work environment? Institutions invest in what they value.

Ultimately, one of the most important things this group will do is to decide what it wants to learn, what questions it wants to pursue. So they are starting by asking:

Who are the students we are serving? What do we really know about them?

What do we know about the multiple course versions our institution has had over 17 years? What has worked well, we are satisfied with, ain't broke, and doesn't need fixing? How do we honor our past, particularly the hard work of our course leaders, while at the same time being free to move forward in new directions if we should so choose?

How can we assess the effectiveness of our multiple previous and current versions of this course?

When we have determined all of the above, what do we want the purposes of our new course to be?

How will it connect to the institutional mission?

The American People Want a President Not a Professor

10-3-12

As all my readers know I am sure that in just several days will be the first of the 2012 presidential debates. In one press report I read of the candidates' debate coaches' strategies, it was reported that one of the President's handlers opined that the President was being coached to give shorter answers because "the American people want a President not a professor." I understood that sentiment but my feelings were hurt a bit.

It would take me more than a succinct blog posting to recount all the classic stereotypes of professors, many of them not complimentary. Here are just a few.

- we are "eggheads"
- we "live in an ivory tower"
- we don't live in the "real world"
- we are badly dressed*we are underworked and overpaid (after all we teach (work) only 12 hours a week (or some of us lucky full professors less)
- we are all leftist weirdo's

I am not going to go on in that vein. You get the point.

I look back on my 32.5 years as a professor on the public payroll and think about what my public expected of me.

No, they didn't expect me to be "President."

But they did expect me to:

be a leader—especially in my field (I became THE leader of my field)

know what I was talking about (I did that and became an international expert on at least one subject and probably several more)

be studious (which is why I read books in the little league baseball parks and my kids' parents thought I was strange)

honor my employer (the state of South Carolina) but still be a bit unconventional---I met those expectations

discover and contribute new knowledge and practices for the improvement of higher education in their state (which I did by developing first-year programs to help more of their children/citizens be successful in college and more likely to be retained)

help retain varsity athletes (I did that, including one Heisman trophy winner)

be an outstanding teacher—better than their kids experienced in high school (I did win the University's outstanding teaching award early in my career and it was the apex of my career!)

be interested in their children and give them good advice, help them get jobs, write them recommendations (I delivered on all of those)

be more productive than other "state employees" which was a very negative stereotype

open up their kids to new possibilities (I did that in ways that I am sure did not always please the parents—I had one father tell me angrily that I had "radicalized" his daughter!

provide their kids with a memorable experience (when I run into my former students, oh they do tell me they remember me—what do they remember? That I made them read newspapers they had never read before, like The New York Times; that I exposed them to ideas and perspectives like they had never heard before —especially during the Vietnam War--, and that I was very giving personally of my time, concern,

interest, compassion)

take special care of politicians' and other powerful peoples' children (I did that especially in special assignments I got of privileged advisees!)

be more liberal than the general populace (I really delivered on that)

be an exemplary representative of my university (I was conscious of the need to do this every day of my 32.5 years of service)

I knew I was not expected to be President but was expected to be other things in return for the privilege of being a professor and public servant. As I told my students, for example in my most recent commencement address, there are many ways to be "leaders." And I am confident that professors are some of the finest leaders in our country.

The Perfect Experiential Exercise for Linking Inside and Outside the Classroom Learning

10-15-12

I don't know what it is about fall that moves me to reflection and benchmarking prior year to date goings on in my life. I can't explain this. Just find I am much more prone to do this in the fall. And this particular fall with a presidential election, is an especially potent trigger.

In my public speaking I find I am regularly trying to give good examples of strategies to illustrate the power of linking in-class learning with out-of-class experiences to reinforce those curricular objectives. Oh how I recall a way to do this! So I ask now what better way than in a presidential election season to have your students go see and hear—and then think, discuss, reflect, write about what they learned?

I experienced this for the first time myself as a college student. I was a senior. It was the election of 1964, Goldwater vs. Johnson. I was a student deep in the heart of Appalachia, in southeastern Ohio, a region right now that is being hotly contested by both candidates over the coal issue. Forty-eight years later some things have changed, some have not.

The candidate I heard and the setting were memorable for me. I saw one of the last "whistle stop" campaign rallies—now an anachronism as the candidates fly in almost anywhere and everywhere. I write this on the day that Governor Romney is flying into Asheville, N.C. which is 35 miles from my home.

But on my special memory day, the rally was held at a railhead in Marietta, Ohio. The candidate was Barry Goldwater. He stood on the rear platform of the caboose. I was struck by how handsome he was, and even more by what he said. There in the heart of Appalachia, in the state that no Republican has ever won the White House without winning that state, Barry Goldwater blasted Social Security and promised that if elected he would abolish it (not quite like Mr. Romney promising to repeal Obamacare). I couldn't believe it. How could he have been so oblivious to the demographics of the constituents of the environs in which he was speaking? So, wise young man that I was, I immediately told myself there was no way he could win Ohio, let alone the country.

And I was right: he was resoundingly defeated, carrying only five southern states with their new Republican party voters.

I recall that I was holding a poster. But for the life of me I cannot recall what my poster said.

As a backdrop for the railhead stop, there was an old hotel with a long ago painted sign on the wall announcing its establishment in 1906, and describing it as "modern." It was a perfect mantra for the candidate about to be defeated.

I also remember that he promised very honestly to intervene much more aggressively in Vietnam to stop the Communist menace before it reached our shores! The opposing candidate, Lyndon Johnson, was not forthcoming about the wheels he had already set in motion to deeply engage us in what became the quagmire of Vietnam—a war that led to my being drafted one year after I graduated from college and 18 months after my attending my first presidential rally.

Our students need to know that regardless of which candidate they hear, what is said will affect them. They have skin in the game whether they know it or not. I knew I did at that time, but not nearly as much as it turned out I did.

For me the event was perfectly connected to what I was learning in the curriculum and I have remembered that integration for the next nearly half century.

Students in Transition: What's New? What's Old?

10-19-12

Recently I attended the University of South Carolina's annual conference on Students in Transition. This meeting focuses on the critical transitions of the first year, sophomore year, transfer, and senior year experiences. It was started in 1995 by myself and my USC colleague, Stuart Hunter. She and her team and still going strong organizing and hosting this meeting.

The original meeting was an outgrowth of four conferences we had organized in 1990, 91, 93, and 94 on The Senior Year Experience. We very much wanted to continue this series given the importance we attached to calling more attention to the needs of seniors as they leave our institutions. But the conference numbers were making the viability of the conference series questionable. So we decided to continue to focus on seniors by rolling it into a new meeting concept, one looking at multiple student transitions during the undergraduate years, but assuming that the much greater interest in the first year would pay for the meeting. That's exactly what happened. We called this new focus and concept "Students in Transition." The first year still trumps in terms of numbers of sessions, presenters and attendees. I wish I could tell you that there is relatively more interest in the senior year now that that work has matured. I cannot. It is still a very hard sell. Unfortunately, higher education institutions are increasingly managed by the same philosophy that runs most American for-profit companies: short run gains—and not to worry about long haul views of ROI. The USC National Resource Center will soon be releasing though a new book on the senior year, updating my 1998 Jossey-Bass book, The Senior Year Experience, high time! Maybe this will rejuvenate interest. I certainly hope so. While many circumstances faced by seniors have changed, the basic approaches to them have not.

But there certainly is more attention being paid to sophomores: second year seminars, more intentional attention to advisement and career planning, and the continuation of many first-year type programs which previously had been prematurely withdrawn from many students whose success was still very tentative. The focus on the sophomore year has been accelerated recently by the imprimatur from the 2009 Jossey-Bass book, *Helping Sophomores Achieve*, by my USC colleagues Stuart Hunter and Barbara Tobolowsky (now of the University of Texas at Arlington) and yours truly.

The "SIT" conference is not a big affair. This year it drew a hardy band of just under 350. I know from my own experience of managing a thriving conference series all about the economics of conference organization. My successors at USC certainly aren't doing this for surplus revenue generation. I admire them for staying the course and continuing to call attention to the importance of these other student transitions. Thanks to them, the concept of "transition" programs is now deeply institutionalized and enshrined in American higher education. I find this most gratifying.

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Moving from “Access” to “Success”: Just What Exactly Does That Mean?

10-29-12

Fairly recently there has been an important shift in the language of open access institutions, which have long lived by the mantra that “access” was their ultimate goal. As a reaction in part to the criticisms on developmental education, and moreover, on high failure rates, low degree completion and transfer rates in the community college, a new mantra has emerged: open access institutions are now focusing on “success.” Does this mean that they are giving up their emphasis on “access”? No, not at all. So what does this mean? Can we have our cake and eat it too?

I think the focus on success means this:

That we don’t give up access

That access remains a core societal mission connected to social justice and upward social mobility

That we switch from equating our success as a measure of gross enrollments to the outcomes we achieve for our students

This means that the number one status metric must no longer be growth (how un-American)

That we become willing to pay an initial short-term institutional revenue price for a transition to success

That the ultimate criteria for decision making becomes not what drives enrollment but what are effective educational practices

That we stop viewing requirements as “barriers” to access

That we make mandatory as many high impact practices” as possible

That we develop new mantras. This means ending once and for all “look to your left and look to your right”

It means ending academic social Darwinism

It means taking more institutional responsibility for student learning instead of blaming the students for their failures. This is not the same as absolving them from responsibility

It means a focus on student success after matriculation as opposed to the various “success” measures of students in high school. In other words, the focus will be more on what we do for students after they enter college than simply recruiting students who are already advantaged to succeed

It means, as my friend Kay McClenney says so correctly: “students don’t do optional”—we must move from offering a smorgasboard of elective experiences to offering a menu of required experiences that increase the probability of academic success

It means not practicing negative self-fulfilling prophecies like: “Oh, our students would never do that because they are....”

Our language really does make a difference. People are led by the language of their leaders. This talk about a focus on “success” is encouraging. But now I am waiting to see if the leaders who are talking this talk will change the educational practices of their institutions to be consistent with this new mantra. Institutions focused on success really do behave differently than those focused only or primarily on access. We’ll see....

Policies Make a Difference in Student Success

10-31-12

I am going to open with the title again: “policies make a difference in student success.”

Recently I wrote a blog posting contrasting what “access” institutions do vs. “success” institutions. One of the big differences are their policies. The primary emphasis in “access” institutions is to have policies that promote easy and immediate access, and thus insure revenue from first term headcount. The historic view in these institutions has been that policies that compel too many required behaviors on the part of students represent “barriers” to success. I do not doubt for a minute the commitment of these institutions to promoting access and opportunity for students. “Success” institutions on the other hand know that certain policies are more likely to produce academically successful students, even though those policies stipulate that certain things are required for students.

We all are searching for ways to improve student performance. I like to urge the institutions I work with to focus on what they control. And their policies are something they control. I acknowledge there are important Federal government policies that you don’t control at the institutional level, especially in financial aid. For publicly funded state institutions, there are also state policies, which transcend the control of individual institutions. But overwhelmingly the majority of policies that confront students are those created by people like you and me who work at the institutional level.

I first learned experientially about the power of policies to change human behaviors when I arrived in South Carolina in early 1967, not even three years after the landmark Civil Rights Act and only two years after the Voting Rights Act. Because I was white, many whites felt they could—and therefore did—express to me their commitment to resist these new laws. They assured me that the federal government could not make them do certain things. They were wrong of course. Thanks to the federal law a vast range of behaviors changed in terms of employment, interstate commerce and travel. And we all began to eat together; use the same doors, toilets, drinking fountains together; go to the movies together; sit together on public transportation; and, most importantly, go to school together. And then, date and marry each other.

So I am big believer in having to get the policy levers right at the campus level.

Here are some of the policies that I think are particularly important:

probationary admission (monitored requirements—do you stipulate them or simply admit students to sink or swim?)

eligibility (including requirement) for on- campus residence

participation in orientation (cost, availability of need based scholarships; elective vs. required)

placement testing

preparation for placement testing (testing is high stakes, but few places offer students preparation for the all important tests)

advising (seeing an advisor—is this optional or required?)

enforcing course prerequisites (do you or don't you?)

last date to apply

last date to start classes (how late in the term do you allow students to actually start—I commonly hear of students being allowed to enter a course after it is up to two weeks underway!)

last date to withdraw from course with no penalty (do your policies encourage early commitment and best efforts or the opposite, allow students to coast along with minimal effort because they know they can drop right up the end of the term?)

attendance (should you have a special attendance policy for new students? Think about it folks: why do athletes graduate at a higher level? Because their attendance is monitored)

satisfactory progress (definition of)

probation (will there be a program of structured support or can students just continue to do business engaging in the same behaviors that got them on probation in the first place?)

readmission post suspension (are there any special requirements for participation in structured support activities, such as tutoring?)

participation in high impact practices, particularly first-year seminars, academic support, learning communities;

summer bridge (whom do you make this available to; of whom do you require it?)

Supplemental Instruction (which is optional) vs. "structured learning assistance" (which is required for certain students)

declaration of major (is this required prematurely—for example, at time of matriculation?)

And this is only a beginning list. I suggest you undertake a "policy audit" of your rules with the central question: will this rule contribute to a greater probability of student success. Getting our policies right is all a part of the larger strategy of taking more responsibility for student success. The alternative is continuing to blame the victim.

Watch this Place: Governors State University

11-5-12

Recently my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I had the opportunity to learn more about and see firsthand one of the last “upper division” institutions left that is now adding the first and second years of the undergraduate curriculum: Governors State University in Illinois. It was revealing to us—of many things, most fundamentally, the continuing value of the perennial questions we all need to be asking about the foundation of the undergraduate experience.

Governors State, a regional, public, comprehensive, university, founded in 1969, will admit in the fall of 2014 the class of 2018, its first “first-year” cohort, of 270 students. This transition comes 42 years after my work began in transforming the first year. What a tremendous advantage the University has in learning from so many efforts at so many, many places, to increase the probability of students success. And they have studied and learned well, and are incorporating most of the best practices that Betsy and I have observed elsewhere.

Of course, they are not creating a new university, starting from scratch. They will have 45 years of history, traditions, culture, rules, practices under their institutional belt when they welcome these new students—for whom the original university was never designed. So this is no easy task. It requires a tremendous amount of thinking, research, planning, effort, courage, open mindedness and a willingness to examine what will need to be changed to insure success for new students.

In thinking about the challenges they face, Betsy and I were also reminded of some of the perennial questions that any of us who work with first-year students need to keep in the forefront. We can never be reminded too often of these questions—for often, the questions are more important than the answers.

So what if you could be founding fathers and mothers and welcome a first class as your institution? What would you keep of your current approaches? What would you change?

Here are some of the questions we think you need to continue to pose:

- *What would an excellent first year be for your students, your institution?
- *What kind of a first year might best lay the foundation for the attainment of your mission statement?
- *What kind of first year might draw the students you most want to have?
- *What kind of first year might draw the students who most need what you will offer?
- *What kind of first year might best serve your region in accordance with the aspirational goals of your strategic plan?
- *What kind of first year can be most readily assessed for reporting outcomes to the regional accreditor whose visit will surely come?
- *What kind of first year might make you stand out, be truly unique, and offer your students a quality educational experience they cannot attain elsewhere?
- *What is the big vision for your first year?
- *And what is the contributing role of your unit to this vision?

The Campus as Shelter

11-7-12

Since 9/11 and the shootings at Virginia Tec and Northern Illinois University, Americans have been far more focused on safety in general and specifically on college campuses. Some years ago I wrote a foreword to a monograph on the concept of the residential first year in which I referred to residence halls, in the abstract ideal, as a "sanctuary." And this past week as Super storm Sandy wrought its havoc on our fellow citizens in New York and New Jersey, I noted with interest that the City University of New York (CUNY) had opened its campuses to the needy of New York City as "shelters." I am working with CUNY this year on a big project and so have been even more attentive to any news reports related to this premiere, urban, public university system.

Of course, the City University of New York has long been regarded as the higher education equivalent to the Statue of Liberty. It led the way to show the rest of the nation how to remove most all financial barriers to access to higher education. It led the way in creating at the city level equal opportunity access programs back in the mid 60's, thus showing the rest of the country how to bring the full impact of the Civil Rights Act down to the local level. Whatever CUNY has done, the rest of us have taken notice of. When it provided free tuition it made the rest of us ask what we could be doing to demonstrate commitment. When it ended free tuition, this was noted by all as a harbinger of new directions. When it ended the offering of developmental education in its senior colleges in the 90's, that was widely noted too. And this past week, when the University became, literally and officially part of the City's "shelter" system, we noted and this time applauded again.

My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I have a long and dear friend, Scott Evenbeck, who is the founding President of CUNY's New Community College. He wrote us a message on November 5 in which he told Betsy and me "The first student arriving on campus today said he was so glad to be in a safe place. His house had 10' of water..."

"So glad to be in a safe place..." This speaks to me about what a primary mission of higher education has become: the providing of a safe place.

Since the storm, I just haven't been able to stop thinking about our campuses as "shelter", "safe houses", "safe places", "refuges", "sanctuaries." In a country where we have been gradually gutting the social safety net, and will do so even more probably no matter who gets elected on November 6, college campuses have become something that was not our historic primary mission: we are part of the social safety net. This means we performing many societal roles for which we were not originally designed, such as providing health and child care, and many more such roles.

We provide, literally "shelter" for some students who are, literally, homeless.

We provide an environment where ideas can be exchanged with civility even where there are strong divergences of opinion. This is in contrast to the screaming heads on television and to some politicians who actually urged voters to support them this year because of their refusal to compromise.

In a culture where all citizens are constantly bombarded with false or misleading claims by advertisers, we provide a culture where factual presentations are still the gold standard.

In a culture where mass culture and the political sphere expose us constantly to extreme emotional pitches and manipulation, on campus we still worship at the altar of the god of rationality.

In a culture which is extremely successful in producing extremes of wealth and success, on campus we still strive to treat all equally.

Funding is our “Crack”

11-7-12

I think about this all the time. And I try to do what I can to change it. I am fighting a losing battle. Have been trying to think of a label for this phenomenon: “crack” is what I have chosen.

Higher education leaders, right down to the unit level, are addicted to crack. Crack is the revenue that results for our unit/institution as a result of the decisions we make and especially the policies we put in place. What ever happened to the criteria of “effective and legitimate educational outcomes” as the criteria for our decisions?

We all know what happened. For one thing, nothing is more important to Americans than money. And we administrators and leaders of America’s colleges are Americans. We have absorbed the culture and its values. We evaluate our institutions and compete with other places in terms of our wealth. We aspire to wealth. There is so much we can do with it—and much, or so we think, that we can’t do without it.

I think and write frequently about the policies we adopt that are designed to increase revenues, but which may have deleterious effects on educational success for our students. Examples:

*Allowing students to start as late as possible, just as long as we can get them in the “count.” This is not good for students. Gives them an equal opportunity to fail. But we think it is good for us short term financially.

*Not requiring students to actually see an academic advisor. We think this is removing a “barrier” to access and ease of entry into the institution. More access we have, the more revenue. We think it is good for us. I think it is bad policy for student success.

*Not requiring students to participate in Orientation. This means one less barrier. And one less “cost.” But, we know that participation in Orientation correlates with great probability of persistence. So why don’t we mandate this. Again, the answer: one less barrier so more revenue.

*Not requiring high impact practices like learning communities, first-year seminars, Supplemental Instruction. We think it saves us money when we don’t offer these forms of support. We save money so we make money. Well maybe in the short term. But fewer of our students are successful in the long term—actually even in the short term, the very first term and year. So then we lose what would have been their continuing funding revenue. You get the idea.

Short term gains is what we have become all about. We have adopted the corporate culture all as part of the corporatization of the American academy.

We are addicted to the crack of immediate funding, a kind of fiscal immediate gratification.

What will it take to change this? I am not sure. But I am going to keep railing against the crack addiction—and try not to practice it myself.

*Not requiring students to participate in Orientation

Exhibit A for How to Sustain an Innovation: Forty Years Old and Going Stronger Than Ever

11-16-12

I reached a real milestone in my professional life this week, which also represented an even more important milestone for my university, the University of South Carolina. I refer to the 40th anniversary of the University 101 course, "The Student in The University", three credits, offered since the fall of 1972. The anniversary was noted with a special reception hosted by the University's President and his wife, Harris and Patricia Pastides. Not only were past accomplishments recognized and celebrated, but important views of the future of this innovation were offered.

This was a milestone for me because I was in the first cohort of University faculty and staff who first taught this course that beginning fall offering, 1972. This was a truly transformative life changing experience for me. Two years later I became the first faculty director of the course, a position in which I served for 25 years until my non "retirement" in 1999.

This anniversary celebration is worth noting in a blog posting because of the tremendous impact this course has had on the rest of American higher education and that of many other countries as well.

University 101 has been the archetypal prototype for now what are known generically as "first- year seminars", or "college success" or "student success" or "FYE" courses. This course type in many adapted forms is now offered in approximately 90% of the regionally accredited colleges and universities in the United States, and a number of other countries as well, especially Canada.

University 101 and all its knock-off versions have been offered for literally millions of college students.

A wide body of empirical research has determined multiple positive student outcomes associated with participation in the course, including:

- enhanced retention rates
- enhanced graduation rates
- greater likelihood of seeking assistance, interacting with faculty and staff outside of class, joining co-curricular groups, and participating in on-campus activities outside the classroom

University 101 was the launching point for the highly influential conference series on The First- Year Experience, now in their 32nd year of offering.

University 101 and the resulting FYE conferences, in turn, were the launching pads for the establishment of the University's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

The Center has had many accomplishments and influences but most would agree that its greatest influence has been the creation of a scholarly literature base through the production and dissemination of a very substantial number of monographs and books, and its flagship publication: the blind, refereed Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

The net effect of all these outcomes is that the beginning college experience and its new students have become a much, much higher priority for higher education policy makers, resource allocators, and rank and file practitioners. A whole new field of professional endeavor within the academy has been created, known universally as "the first-year experience."

Thanksgiving 2012

11-20-12

Here we are about to begin our annual Thanksgiving vacations, for those of us who work in the academy in the US anyway. What a curious custom. When I lived in Canada as a child I found their celebration of Thanksgiving much more rational in terms of the calendar and when such a day could be connected to the cycle of agricultural harvests.

Now as with so many holidays, the original intent has been corrupted, or at least modified and expanded.

But for me it is a period when I do spend some time reflecting on what I am thankful for in my professional and personal life.

I will engage in some reflection here which is directed to the professional, but which will surely also verge on the personal. For me to separate the two is a challenging intellectual, arbitrary and abstract exercise.

I am thankful at Thanksgiving 2012 that—and for...

- the greater probability that the during the next four years our students will not see a significant reduction in their federal financial aid
- the election is behind us—sort of
- a bell weather state, California, just showed the rest of the country the importance of approving a constitutional amendment to raise taxes to increase support for education
- a handful of states' voters voted affirmatively to enhance inclusion and rights for a previously discriminated against population—with my hope being that any sign of increased tolerance will benefit all Americans including those on the campuses that I serve
- we are one year closer to withdrawing our troops from Afghanistan, many of whom will end up on our campuses for us to give them the help and the skills they need and deserve
- the privilege to work in campus environments that, while they may have internal divisions, are not as badly divided as the rest of our country
- the privilege to work in higher education settings where we have more freedom to express ourselves than in most work settings outside
- more opportunities to do work of socially redeeming value
- greater chances to discuss our differences in environments of greater tolerance and civility
- a cohort of colleagues who are some of the brightest, most creative, most supportive professionals anywhere
- our students, who in spite of all our national and international challenges, remain so hopeful and determined to improve their circumstances, and who are so much fun to work with!

- and in my own case, the opportunities to continue to do my own work to support higher education and our students, including some brand-new types of work which I will be announcing later in 2013.

Partnerships: More of what is Needed on Campus and in Washington

12-2-12

I write this after just having had a total immersion experience! On November 29-30 my colleagues at the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, immersed ourselves in a very intensive learning experience grappling with about 170 academic and student affairs administrators and faculty, in what we called an "Academic and Student Affairs Leaders' Institute." This was held in Asheville, North Carolina and was sponsored by our non-profit organization. The basic purpose of the meeting was to help each institutional team create a plan to take back home to enhance the effectiveness of very specific academic/student affairs partnerships.

As an outcome of this meeting, we will be releasing and disseminating after the first of the new year a statement of principles for effective practices in such partnerships, a product emerging from the contributions of all present at this convening. We hope it will be widely considered and used on campuses for aspiration, planning, measurement, and improvement purposes.

The theme of pursuing increased student success through academic and student affairs partnerships has been a basic principle of my own professional practices since I first saw such a partnership at play in creating one of the most important innovations in American higher education in the later 20th century: the University 101 and then "first-year experience" concepts. I have seen the powerful differences such partnerships can make and have been troubled by why we don't have more of them.

Much more recently, the work of the non-profit organization, which I co-lead, has been focusing primarily on helping campuses develop a new vision for a more effective beginning college experience—for both new and transfer students. We have now worked with about 250 institutions to develop such a new vision and we are finding the greatest challenge is not in developing that vision but executing it! So as an organization we are increasingly moving towards spending more time helping on the execution in addition to the creating and planning for the vision.

As we have grappled with how best to help campuses develop an aspirational plan to improve student success we have realized that an essential means to this end is the creation and improvement of partnerships between academic and student affairs administrators, and faculty.

Before the 1960's, to the extent that students got help at all at America's colleges and universities, from persons other than fellow students, it was solely from the faculty. But in the second half of our last century we created what is now a very, very large (as in hundreds of thousands) new cohort of educators we have come to know (and appreciate) as student affairs professionals. But it has been one thing to add this new component of the campus environment and quite another to learn how to take maximum advantage of what they might bring to the table of educational effectiveness. My point here is that we have to learn how to work together more effectively. These are two different cultures. The challenge is not to merge them so much as to complement them, integrate them and figure out how to best harness the talents of both. It is in that spirit that we convened all these educators at the above referenced meeting.

Timing in life is always important. In the week that we convened the academic and student affairs leaders, we saw in our nation's capital the continuing stand off between the White House, and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress, over the so-called "fiscal cliff" which ultimately has come down to the issue of whether to increase taxes on those of us who are the most advantaged financially. The conference attendees were like the millions and millions of other Americans who are sick of the adult leaders in our capitol not acting like leaders and not acting like adults.

'Tis the Season

12-9-12

For those of us in the academic world, the end of the term is a good time for reflection and taking stock of the markers for our lives. And this particular time is marked also by the holiday season and the continuing settling of the dust after the presidential election.

It is a time to remind that students that miracles do happen at this time of year so they should not despair. Personally, I was the recipient of many.

It is time to remind students that the emotional, non rational holiday period is the worst time to make major life decisions. I made some bad decisions in my youth but none of them during this season.

It is time to bid farewell to some of our colleagues whose retirement we will be saluting, and thus an opportunity to contemplate our own. Personally, I am flunking retirement. I went to a pre- retirement seminar once sponsored by the South Carolina State Retirement System where we were asked to participate in an exercise where we had to write down the things we like to do outside our professional work. In pulling the activity together the facilitator told us that "studies have shown" that those who couldn't list over 20 items were going to have a difficult time in making the transition. So I knew that was not a good course for me.

It is a good time to recall that in the four years prior to be electing Vice President of the US, Dick Cheney donated less than 4% of his 20 million dollar salary from Haliburton to charity. When you do so, ask yourself if you could have/should have given more, particularly this year in what may be the last year we get to claim charitable contributions as tax deductible expenses. When I learned about Mr. Cheney's inspiring generosity, I resolved to do better than that...and I have.

It is time to think about a new year's resolution. Yes, the concept is ridiculous when you look at the horrendous failure rates, even greater than those we tolerate in US higher education in our gateway courses! But I think we need to at least consider the idea anyway. I suggest it would be more meaningful, and more likely to bear some fruition if we considered other potential goals than those relating to dietary intake, weight, and exercise.

It is time this year to hope that by the time the New Year starts our minority political party and our President will have reached some grand bargain on debt and taxation levels. But I am a realist. So I can only fantasize about what it might be like to have greater predictability as a consumer, investor, and taxpayer. So I am going to spend my time instead thinking about the things that I can actually leverage and even control.

It is a good time of year to give our students some special affirmation. Hey, what a way to end the term. Might even make some of them want to return. That could be your personal contribution to enhancing student retention.

And it is a good time of year to tell some of your colleagues what they have meant to you this year. Do it before you go out imbibing with them so they know that it is not the spirits talking. This would be in the spirit of the season.

What's to Be Learned?

12-12-12

My colleagues in our non-profit Institute feel compelled to remind me now and then not to be too "political." This is a challenge for me. Politics is all about values, and values based belief, policies and actions. And I am constantly aware of my values and how I want to base my behaviors on them. For example, my values about the value of the pursuit of social justice, especially when applied to disadvantaged college students, has been at the basis of my work in higher education for four decades. But unlike some of our country's leaders in the Congress, I do want to reach across the aisle and embrace colleagues of different political persuasions.

As some of my readers may know, I am recovering former historian. This means that how I see the world, including and often especially the academy, is influenced by how I understand the influence of history on whatever I happen to be trying to understand.

And so the current dynamics, especially of the US political party that lost the recent US presidential election, makes me wonder what the analog may be to the college campus.

For the initial few days after the election I was optimistic that the defeat of one party would lead to some changes that would be more than cosmetic in its policy propositions. But now six weeks later I am less optimistic. Admittedly, not nearly enough time has elapsed. I find myself asking, "What have they learned?" Shouldn't it be obvious that their policies on immigration, taxation, women's rights (especially related to reproductive choices and freedom), marital rights, were counterproductive to winning the center? Surely the good analytical minds of this party can now see that their positions have so alienated the majority of women, especially single women, Hispanics, African Americans, gay Americans, that given the demographic trends of our country we could conclude that this party does not have a viable long term future unless it makes major changes. One would think.

And so I ask myself, look at higher education and what is analogous? What are some of our own beliefs and policies that are clearly not working, that are driving our students away (the opposite of retention), and that threaten our future viability? What is right there for us to see? But so far we are refusing to budge. Maybe even we are digging in and being even more recalcitrant as we cling to our cherished preferences. How are we acting as if we still teach the students we used to have, or think we used to be like, or wished we had instead, instead of the ones we actually have?

Let's get specific John.

What about our continuing to focus on admitting students, providing access, so we can make money from the way they spin our funding formulas as opposed to focusing on having policies that would make these students more likely to be successful. I wrote about this recently in this electronic column. It is all about being "success" focused rather than "access" focused.

What about our reluctance to require students to do the things we know will make them more likely to be successful (e.g. orientation, advising, taking first-year seminars)?

What about our continuing tolerance for such high failure rates in gateway courses?

What about our continuing tolerance for what my wife, Betsy Barefoot, calls “assessment free zones”? I refer to the emphasis I see on assessment of low status programs (like first-year seminars and developmental education) but holding harmless any serious efforts to measure outcomes in the real college curriculum, the traditional discipline based gateway courses.

Addressing Retention: Only with a Slog!

12-17-12

I rarely ever quote the former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, one of the Neocons who brought us the disastrous war in Iraq, positively, but I do in this context. Referring to the war once as what he predicted would be a long, hard “slog”, gives me my text for the day.

I have just participated in the annual meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which I look forward to. Why? Because I think the regional accreditors are some of the most positive forces for change that we have going for us in the academy today. And I enjoy my reunions with a huge number of friends I have made as a fellow higher educator in the region for over four decades.

Like all the annual meetings of the regional accreditors, SACS has an exhibit area for “vendors.” Much as I have tried to avoid becoming this, I have become what they classify as a “vendor”— that is “I” in the sense of the non-profit organization which I lead. We want to talk to fellow higher educators about our work and so we rent a booth space. We are a not-for-profit 501c3 public charity, but still we are a “vendor.” And we are not the only not-for-profit vendor, although we are in the minority.

So what has this to do with “slog”? Well it has to do with all the primarily for-profit vendors who shamelessly claim to address and improve retention. And they make some really impressive claims. The majority of them seem to be addressing retention through technology driven magic bullets. In my interactions with fellow vendors I am impressed by their earnestness, sincerity, enthusiasm, and that uniquely American drive to sell. But I am not impressed that very many of them have any in-the-trenches experience with today’s college students.

In contrast, as much as I would like to offer panaceas, I cannot. For better than all the other vendors I know the only way to address the challenges of retention are through long, hard, “slogs.” There are no magic bullets. No quick fixes. Caveat emptor.

As I watch the potential customers interact with the vendors I am impressed with how much pressure many of my fellow educators believe they are under to improve retention. And this is real pressure. Now more and more of them are in states and institutions where finally funding levels are being influenced by retention and graduation performance metrics. No wonder they are feeling pressure. But this pressure I believe leads to a level of desperation that makes many of them very vulnerable to the entreaties of well intentioned sales persons.

I am sure of few things but I am sure that the only improvements I can imagine will come from long, hard slogs, and primarily not from what we do with technology. Instead they will come from the direct actions, decisions, pedagogies we educators take in direct communication with our students and with each other. Most of what we most need, we already have, and we don’t need to buy. What we already have are ourselves.

Year End Reflections for 2012

12-19-12

Many of my readers have to be doing the same thing I am doing here near the end of calendar year (as opposed to academic year) 2012-reflecting on that year and what it has meant for higher education in our country and ourselves.

These are some of the things I am thinking about:

On the national level...

The election is behind us, but only technically. It settled some things, like the fate of Obamacare, but not others.

An encouraging outcome for higher education was the approval of California voters to increase taxes in support of all levels of education. As California goes, so goes the nation. We will see. We can hope.

The unsettled fiscal cliff negotiations will make a huge difference for the fortunes of state budgets for higher education. If the country goes over the cliff and faces sequestration, reducing the federal transfer of payments to the states by about 8% will surely lead to huge cuts in public state appropriations for higher education. All we can do now is hope this does not happen.

This fall has seen declines in enrollments at community colleges as students have chosen to enter recovering labor markets. Somehow, we have to do a better job of persuading students to enter higher education no matter what the state of the immediate job market.

This year has seen unprecedented levels of public questioning about the value of higher education, especially vis-à-vis the costs students and families must assume to attain our services. While I think such questioning is healthy, I fear it discourages those students that need us the most and for whom there is no chance of upward social mobility without our credentialing.

This year saw unprecedented attacks on the merits of developmental education. This set of educational endeavors, as American as apple pie and offered in our country since the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, is now being rethought, albeit defensively. This was needed. But I fear the poor are going to end up being the losers as usual. The inflammatory rhetoric against developmental education is not likely to lead to rational changes.

We saw this year the advent of the MOOCs, the massive open on-line courses, a development having the potential to transform undergraduate education, especially in the high enrollment, first- year, cash cow courses. This is really going to shake us up and challenge our medieval guild approach to the teaching of introductory courses, where each faculty member is a cottage industry unto him or herself and where we realize now unacceptable levels of failure. I don't know where this is going to go, but I know it is not going to go away.

One political party, as it reappraises its stance opposing immigration reform, may now be more open to granting permanent residency status, if not outright citizenship, to immigrants (who most likely wouldn't vote for the party anyway), who either attain a college education or serve in the country's military. This would further transform our campuses.

For the time being at least, we seem to have lost our willingness to engage in foreign military adventure. This means our military will be downsized and more of its former active duty service members will be coming to our campuses. This is a good thing. I hope we are going to be ready for them. I know one for-

profit university that definitely is (the American Public University System).

2013

Thinking about the Year Ahead

1-7-13

It is reasonable to assume that my readers have completed, or will soon, some kind of seasonal holiday that comes at the end of December and carries on into the new calendar year. And in that context I can't help but thinking how what one did, read, thought about, over this period, provides a lens for focusing on our thinking about the New Year ahead.

For me, and perhaps you, the holidays gave me an opportunity to spend more time around small children than I normally have.

And to see more movies.

And this year to watch our national legislative body further disgrace itself to new heights of incompetence, gamesmanship, lack of statesmanship.

And to reflect on the growing signs of an economic recovery which we hope will augur well for all.

When I was a teaching faculty member at the University of South Carolina I realized that if I never set foot in a high school or never interacted with high school students, that I couldn't fully appreciate what was coming my way in the pipeline. This holiday period I interacted with two of my grandchildren, ages 3 and 8 (admittedly far from high school age), both males, and was reminded how much more important technology is to them in terms of its total role in their lives for purposes of learning, communicating, and entertainment, than it is for most of their teachers.

Their openness to it, speed with which they learn it and from it, is nothing short of awe inspiring. I also noted their awareness of all things related to sports. And the fact that their parents had succeeded in hiding from them the news of the Newtown massacre.

I saw three movies: 1) Django Unchained; 2) This is 40; 3) Silver Linings Playbook. The first one was uniquely American with its belief in violence as a means to settle differences. Can't remember when I had last seen a film in which the gun was a more prominent character. How appropriate just two weeks after the largest massacre of US school children in our sorry history in this regard. This is 40 showed us everything that is going wrong with our California style upper middle class life and was especially striking in its prejudice against people over 40. When my wife and I saw this we were by far the oldest people in the theater. And we had the wisdom to reflect that we wouldn't want to live the way this film depicted contemporary upper middle class American life. And Silver Linings Playbook, about how two emotionally troubled young adults come together and find therapeutic their engagement in dance and music, reminded me of how people establish affinity with one another. That is very important to understanding today's college students.

But I think what most occupied my thinking was the appalling spectacle in the political theater of the immature, that our elected leaders treated us too, especially those of one party. I think the best summation of this whole sorry chapter that I have read came from a quote from West Virginia US Senator, Joe Manchin, who quipped that "the greatest threat to the US economy is the US Congress."

So, how is all this providing a lens for me in my thinking about the New Year, especially as it may play out in higher education?

The upcoming debate about the role of guns in American life is going to be a fertile one for discussion and learning on our campuses. We won't be able to miss this one.

Zero Dark Thirty: Reflections on Persistence

1-9-13

This blog posting is inspired most immediately by a movie my wife and I just saw while on vacation out in Phoenix, [Zero Dark Thirty](#). The film inspires many thoughts including about the current politicized controversy regarding the effects of extreme interrogation methods. But my comments here are triggered by my reactions to the portrayal of the film's central protagonist, who is one of the most focused characters I have ever observed in fictionalized form—or in own my real life experiences. I refer to a twelve year, female, CIA agent, who relentlessly focuses on one thing only for a decade (at least according to the filmmaker) and that is the pursuit of Osama Bin Laden. The adjectives “focused”, “determined”, “resolute”, “single-minded”, “laser-focused”, “persistent”—none of them quite seem to do her justice. After seeing this riveting and highly engaging entertainment, I found myself thinking about persistence, and especially of college students. Of course, that's not new for me. I think about that all the time. That has been my own resolute, laser-like focus for over four decades.

In truth, my thinking and work has been about evenly divided between a focus on individual student persistence, and on institutional focus on student “retention.” But to realize the latter, we have to engender the former. This movie characterization perhaps will get some of our students to think about their own individual traits of persistence. I hope so. I hope both my readers and our students see this film, and that individual persistence is one of the things they will reflect on.

One of the characters in this drama was/is the Central Intelligence Agency, sometimes referred to from the inside as “the Company”. In one scene in the film, in a solitary interview between this female agent and the Director of the CIA, the latter played wonderfully by James Gandolfini of *The Sopranos*' fame, the Director asks her how long she has worked for the Agency—years and “what have you done?” Her reply: in “Nothing.” But the whole point of the film was that “nothing” was incorrect. Everything she had been doing had led to lead the successful analysis, tracking, and discovery of the whereabouts of Bin Laden, and hence the occasion to persuade the CIA Director to lend his credibility to a request to the President to launch the raid that would kill Bin Laden. Similarly, for your students, everything they do in our context leads them to the point where someday they can do something, albeit highly unlikely to be as consequential as tracking down the world's most wanted terrorist.

Persistence is sticking to something. In the former college student best seller book, [In Search of Excellence](#), the authors Peters and Waterman, argue that the most excellent organizations and individuals “stick to the knitting.” How can we teach our students that ability in their world of multi-tasking and attention deficit disorder?

My father used to say to me: “Son, find a good company (not the CIA) and stick with it.” How I wish I could give that advice today to my students. I can't. The mid- twentieth century social contract between corporations and loyal employees has been displaced by new cultures based on other values. My inspirational example of persistence was clearly that of my father who spent 43 years working for the same company, which greatly rewarded him. He loved his company. So what did I do? I stuck with the same company (employer), the University of South Carolina, for three plus decades. I loved my company (still do). Then I took early retirement to start my own “company”, the

non-profit, public charity kind of legally incorporated entity.

I look forward each year to the awarding of the Nobel Prizes. The New York Times publishes a biography of each Nobel Laureate. They are all different, of course, but they are all the same. They had found something by their twenties and they stuck with it; they persisted; and then in their sixties, usually, they were recognized, often for something they did, created, and discovered, some years before. Perhaps these biographies could inspire some of your students to reflect on their persistence.

Risk Management for Students and Their Educators Too

1-14-13

Somewhere between 15-20 years ago, an informal group of administrative leaders and innovators, including myself, at the University of South Carolina got together and created a "risk management advisory council" for the institution. Wow. This was really advanced stuff. At that point in time our institution did not have any officer or office charged with risk management for our large and complex enterprise. I spent the next few years as an active and learning, member of this group. The practice of intentional risk management is truly important for viable organizations.

To fast forward to the present, over Thanksgiving holiday, I had lunch with a special friend and colleague of mine, Dr. Mark Lange, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Mark is Associate Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and is the founder and organizer of the now annual New England Conference on Student Success. He was down in Tennessee visiting one of his daughters, who is on the faculty of East Tennessee University and he had made the easy run down to Asheville to get together with me. One of the things that he was catching me up on was his offering in 2013 a course on the Psychology of Risk Management. Hmm. I had never heard of such a course topic. Sounded like a good idea to me.

And then for an even more immediate perspective on risk management, there is my own personal practice of risk management. I don't smoke, drink alcoholic beverages very moderately, wear seatbelts, exercise vigorously daily, practice dietary discipline and restraint, and try to balance work hard with play hard.

But in past two weeks on my daily jog, I have tripped and reverted to little boy status coming home with really skinned up knees. So I have instituted a new personal risk management policy: as I approach curbs now while running, I slow to a walk and negotiate them much more slowly and deliberately. One of the indicators of adulthood is that we learn from experience and adapt accordingly.

As with many of my adult experiences, such as these in my recent running habits, to films I have seen recently, I often try to apply what I am thinking about to our work with college students. In that vein, I think we need to be much more intentional about teaching them risk management.

We could start by simply introducing the concept of risk, and then risk management. We could get them to brainstorm examples of risk related behaviors, from minor to more significant. They could keep a log. Reflect on their patterns. Consider which ones might be worth trying to "manage." I think this would fit in very nicely with the larger concept many of us try to get first-year college students to think about, namely, the idea of locus of control. As I think about especially our traditional-aged students, you know, the ones who think they are going to live forever, there is no doubt that many of them engage in a wide range of risk behaviors. They take risks, even seek them out, often without much thought at all. I suggest we get them started by focusing on the ones that are less consequential and then trying to up the ante. Some of these behaviors are by now deeply ingrained and simply telling them not to engage in them is not going to work.

I remember an example of that from my late thirties. I had changed dentists. And the first time I saw my new dentist he told me: "I can see you don't use dental floss. Can you give me a reason for not doing so that I have not heard?!" I couldn't. Then he said: "I am sure you have been told you must floss every day, right? But I am not going to tell you that. I am going to ask you to try to floss once a week and come back and see me in three months and tell me if you have been able to do this once a week." I took on the dental floss challenge. And when I came back three months later I was flossing every day, not once a week. About a year later when I reached forty, and decided to take up running again, I realized I needed to take the dental floss approach—manage my risk related to inactivity not by trying to run several miles my first day out, but to start instead by interspersing speed walking and jogging moderately for very short distances. In relatively short order I had become a runner again.

I think that more of us need to be a bit more intrusive in our students' lives and suggest to them that think about the risks they are taking, and introduce to them the concept of personal risk management. Risk management should be for all of us.

It Was a Very Different Time

1-14-13

I have just done something new in terms of my annual calendar, taken a January vacation with my wife, Betsy Barefoot. Seeing as I am not tied to a campus academic calendar any longer, I do have time freedoms that I never had during my 32.5 years of campus-based work. So this January Betsy and I decided to extend our holiday season and take some time in early-mid January. We went to Hawaii and the last thing we did there was spend an entire day at the Pearl Harbor Memorial. If you haven't done this, you should. You will be moved.

As we entered the park that morning the national news was reporting on the pending crisis regarding the extension of the debt ceiling. And the tremendous rift around gun rights/gun control. And the coming push on immigration reform. With those gloomy thoughts about my country swimming in my head, I found they were rapidly replaced by the events of December 7, 1941, and the ensuing period of unprecedented national unity. What a contrast to what we are experiencing now in our country.

We were all willing to sacrifice, including paying higher taxes without protest. We put the greater good of the country before us. We had one common, shared, overriding objective. There were seemingly no limits to our economic output, creativity, resourcefulness, determination.

Ah, what's happened to us. Clearly, we aren't that kind of country now. That's not to say that our country hasn't accomplished much that is positive in the past three quarters of a century.

This leads me to think of our challenges and responsibilities to help our students understand the current state of affairs and what might their potential roles be in resolving this in future years, learning from our mistakes, making better choices.

Hopefully, this year, in our work on campuses we can show students more collegial, peaceful, thoughtful, respectful, unified, ways to approach the common good. That's up to all of us. Each and every one of us can make a difference. I saw that at Pearl Harbor. That hasn't changed.

“Mobilize.” What Might That Mean for Your Work—My Work?

1-23-13

I write this on the weekend of our annual celebration of Martin Luther King. Of all our most celebrated national heroes that one certainly has to be the most gifted in terms of his ability to “mobilize” others. We can’t even begin to think retrospectively about his contributions to the Civil Rights movement without thinking about how he mobilized so many of us—and could still if we allowed him the chance.

And naturally, I am thinking about the connection between Dr. King and the fact that the very day I write this we are inaugurating for the second time, our first African American President, a man also very gifted in mobilizing. I along with many Americans note of course, that the ability to mobilize is a gift that has to be combined with the ability to execute.

As I look at my own career, I think that probably my greatest contribution was to the mobilization of my fellow higher educators to pay more attention to what I described for them as “the freshman year experience.” That was back in 1982 when I first started using that language. It was powerful. It was evocative. It created a movement where for the past 32 years, for example, about a hundred thousand higher educators have come to conferences now called “The First-Year Experience.” And, more importantly, the language mobilized higher educators to take actions to improve the success of new students. So part of mobilizing has to involve the right language to capture attention, to motivate, and to focus.

The same week of this posting I visited for the first time, with my wife, our country’s Pearl Harbor Memorial, coincidentally, in the state from which the President we are inaugurating today hails. This site is not only that of one of the worst tragedies of our history. But it is also the site of an event that mobilized us as a nation as nothing had before or since. In comparison, for example, the attack on Fort Sumter, in 1861, exactly 80 years before, while it mobilized two distinct regions and armies, was very different from the outcome of December 7, 1941. This “day of infamy” mobilized us to extraordinary unity, action, courage, sacrifice, single-minded national purpose. Mobilization is possible. And when we really experience it, it makes almost anything else also possible.

An organization that has been extremely influential in my professional work is Lumina Foundation for Education. The non-profit higher education organization that I lead was the recipient of two grants from Lumina Foundation during the period 2003-2008 that enabled our non-profit entity to “mobilize”, to date, 245 two and four-year institutions to make a major investment of time, energy and resources to create something they didn’t have previously: an actual plan, a new vision, for how to make first-year and new students more successful. And for the high implementers of this plan, increased retention has been realized. The process, which Lumina Foundation made possible, that does this is called Foundations of Excellence®.

I am thinking particularly about Lumina Foundation because they have just released their new Strategic Plan for 2013-16. And “mobilizing” is one of their core goals. We all need to be thinking about this concept and how it could apply to our work, at both the unit, and the institutional levels. I quote from the Lumina Strategic Plan:

"Mobilizing higher education institutions and systems to increase the adoption of data- and evidence-based policies, partnerships and practices that closes attainment gaps for underserved students and improve overall completion rates."

So what might it mean for your work, and my work, if we became better at "mobilizing"?

Still Remembering Dr. King

1-28-13

For many of us on Inauguration Day 2013 it was just impossible to resist comparisons of Martin Luther King and Barack Obama. Different men, different times, different contexts, different speakers. I wonder, wouldn't even want to venture a guess, what percent of our country's college students actually heard/saw the address live. Sadly, I suspect very few relatively. And if they had/did, did they know what they were hearing that might be significant? I hope some of us have been talking about this with them.

I had been in college two years when I heard, live, Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. I remember where I was, time of day, what I was doing. Really quite simple. I was in New Jersey in August of 1963, driving to a second shift job in a factory that made beer and soda cans. Millions of cans and not a drop to drink. A real torture for a 19 year old college kid like me. I was a unionized steelworker, who didn't know what he wanted to major in at the end of his sophomore year, let alone what he wanted to do in life. But I knew what I didn't want to do: work for the rest of my life in that plant. It was a character building experience that had been arranged for me by my father. The older I get the smarter he gets. And he has been deceased for 35 years.

I was working for the first time in my life in a very multi-racial/ethnic environment. I was a child of privilege who was dropped into an ideal learning setting. I was learning that even though I thought the plant's jobs were incredibly monotonous, they were nevertheless the ticket to good middleclass incomes and lifestyles for my fellow workers. They were lucky to have them. And I was happy for them. America was then in the business, unlike now, of growing its middle class.

I knew there was going to be a [march](#) that day. I at least had a car with a simple radio, good enough to catch the speech live as I drove on the Garden State Parkway. After few paragraphs into the speech, I knew that I had never heard anything like this in my life.

So I pulled over on the shoulder and put my flasher on. In my best of college lecture classes I had finally grown up enough to be a very active, focused listener to some really good stuff that would stimulate my thinking if only I let it. But this speech was something else. I had never heard anything like it. Not even President Kennedy's Inaugural, which I had also heard, when I was a senior in high school. Not only how it was being delivered, but what was being said. I shall never forget that day. While I couldn't fully anticipate the contribution the speech would make—how it would increase the momentum to pass the Civil Rights Bill one year later, and the Voting Rights and Higher Education Acts two years later, I knew enough to know that it was going to be a game changer for our country.

And so what are our students thinking about what they heard in this Inaugural? I hope you are helping them think that through. How are they trying to connect the words to what may unfold for them? What difference might it make for them if we developed a more humane policy towards immigration? Do they want to see Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security preserved, modified? Are they regretful there was no mention of the national debt as the Republicans have lamented? Did it strike them as significant to hear a US president reference explicitly our fellow citizens who are "gay"? Did the speech strike them as an unapologetic, even uncompromising exposition of liberalism? So many questions they could be asking. So many things for them to be thinking

about. We are helping them, I hope.

If I were 19 again, and had heard the speech just two days ago, would it have implanted itself in a way that I would remember it 39 years later? I am not sure. But I know that after two years of college, the college experience had already better prepared me to know that what I was hearing was really something special. I am thankful we now celebrate the birthday of this great American. Many of our students cannot remember a time when we didn't, let alone the resistance to doing so. And that is another indicator, that resistance or not, America is changing, ready or not. We need to help our students be more than ready.

A Good Way to Get “Up”: Go to a Talent Show

2-11-13

As my regular readers may recall, I live with my wife in a small mountain town of about 6000 people ([Brevard, N.C.](#)). We love it here. And one of the things we love about it is that it is so easy to get involved, feel connected, and take the pulse of the community. We did that in one particular manner recently by going to a “youth talent show” sponsored by the local Arts Council.

On any given day I really don't know what to think about what kind of country we are. We have certainly become a country of polar opposites—rather than “polar” I guess I should reference other geographic markers, such as bi-coastal, urban vs. rural, etc. And human group markers, such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, etc. In just the past few months, there has been significant movement on the one hand to embrace immigrants and people of different sexual orientations; and there has been movement to elevate the safety of all children over the rights of a minority, gun owners who oppose any restrictions to the unlimited right to bear arms; and the marshaling of massive resistance to all these directions. And if all of that wasn't enough, well here this week the Board of Directors of the Boy Scouts of America actually met and discussed what to do about its traditional policy of denying membership and involvement at any level to gay males. Just what is our country coming to? I feel very torn between all these currents.

But I know that the future of all these issues are going to be decided by the youth of our country as they gradually age, gain the franchise, etc. And there is much evidence they are not nearly as hung up on the same issues that divide their parents. This makes me hopeful. I certainly saw that when I was teaching my students in South Carolina.

I have often suggested to fellow educators that if they want to see who is coming in the pipeline to our colleges and universities, spend some time on a high school campus. I do that several times a year and do pro bono work with kids that are either committed to going to college or at least considering it. I gain as much from these sessions as I do.

Another way to get a fix on who is coming to college and what their interests and talents are would be to go to a local talent show, of ages say up to eight years off from going to college. We did this recently. I was not surprised to see that females were much more willing in this subgroup anyway to display talents publicly than males. The overrepresentation of one gender was significant, but not unusual. I was also pleased to see kids of different socio-economic, racial and ethnic groups performing together, even in this very rural, “red”, southern setting. The conveying of talent through music was the most common form of expression. Too bad that opportunity seems to fall off drastically once kids get to college. There, for most of them, the real action, what matters, for credit, is definitely not the musical expression of talent.

Another thing I enjoyed about this event was that it was nice to see parents applauding and hugging their kids for some other kind of performance than athletics.

The most moving expression of talent was a composition written and sung by four females as a memorial to the victims of the Newtown shootings. We often think kids forget all too quickly, but I have never believed that. They know and remember what really matters.

Surely your community, local high school, and middle school, have talent shows you could check out and get a sneak preview of who's in the future high performing pipeline.

What Does It Mean to Be an “Ideologue”?

2-11-13

Recently, I was having a conversation with a very thoughtful, insightful friend, who knows me pretty well overall. And I respect his perceptions of things greatly. We were talking about my work and he described me as an “ideologue.” This label stunned me. Then I thought, no, I better sit back and consider it.

What is an ideologue? My Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines an ideologue as: “an impractical idealist; theorist; an often blindly partisan advocate or adherent of a particular ideology.”

Part of the context of our conversation arose out of a discussion we were having about the spate of recent comparisons between Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama; and in the case of Lincoln the popular attention he has been receiving recently driven by the film “Lincoln”; and in our current President’s case, the focus of his second Inaugural address. The comparison of both revolved around their capacity to focus, keeping their eye on the prize, with unwavering concentration on a single driven purpose; in the case of Lincoln, this being, of course, the securing of the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution to abolish slavery. Further context was a January 27, 2013 Sunday New York Times article in the Business section, talking about the use of Lincoln as a case study in business schools of CEO management styles.

When the conversation turned to me, I took umbrage, sort of, and challenged that descriptor of “ideologue.” My friend hastily qualified that he had not meant this as a negative at all and offered alternative language to elaborate on what he meant. That language was on the order of me leading a charge, at times a kind of “battering ram” (his words, not mine), and he even used the term “crusade.” That word in term reminded me of the ideologues who organized and led the crusades and slit the throats of the resisting “infidels.”

So, John, does the shoe fit?

Let me deconstruct the definition, briefly:

1. “impractical”: perhaps at times, but usually I would have to say I am the ultimate pragmatist who tries very hard to practice of the art of the possible. I am sure that when I launched the first-year experience movement and began attempting to persuade the academy to take the first year more seriously, that I had plenty of skeptical observers who were saying this attempt was not very “practical.” And by that they would have meant realistic or promising. I believe I have proved them wrong.
2. “idealist”: yes, absolutely, I own that. In fact, my largest single current professional preoccupation is with a process called Foundations of Excellence[®] which has engaged 245 colleges and universities in the use of an idealistic and aspirational set of “Foundational Dimensions of Excellence” (see www.jngi.org). So, yes, there are many manifestations to my idealism. This is a central part of my character, core values and behaviors, dating to my high school days when I first came out of the closet to challenge my peer group with a more idealistic argument to do something which they didn’t want to do (I lost that argument—but that is another story).
3. “blindly partisan”: I admit that I am “partisan” but I would not acknowledge the “blindly.” I believe that to the extent humanly possible I recognize and respect educational philosophies and practices that are different from my own. I understand those differences and often acknowledge their merits. When this comes to politics, the gift of academic freedom has given me the opportunity to be comfortably more partisan than many (without fear of retribution like losing my job), but I think and hope in a very civil way.
4. “theorist”: yes, I own that. I have developed theories for a more preferable state of affairs for first-year, sophomore, transfer, and senior students. I have written and spoken extensively on my views about how to enhance student success in these transitions.
5. “adherent of a particular ideology.” Yes, I own that too. So what then is that ideology? Well, it is my philosophy of student success (unabridged):
 - a. Successful access to and attainment in higher education is the principal channel of upward social mobility in the United States.
 - b. Rates of failure and attrition are unacceptable and represent an enormous waste of human resources and capital. The largest amounts of failure and attrition during the college experience take place during or at the completion of the first year (or the equivalent thereof).

- c. Necessary changes in pedagogies, policies, and curriculum must be based on sound assessment practices and findings, but this assessment must be mission-related and must pay appropriate respect to the vast diversity of American postsecondary institutional types. Institutions want and need to be able to compare their performance in the first college year with peer institutions and/or with aspirational groups in terms of learning outcomes vis a vis recognized, desirable standards.
- d. The public demand for accountability is increasing and will continue to do so. In order to satisfy this demand, campuses must have more data on their student characteristics, what those students experience in college, how and what they are learning, and whether they are improving and receiving value-added knowledge and experiences.
- e. Any efforts to improve the beginning college experience must be more connected to the K-12 pipeline than they are today. Although there are many notable efforts, the pre-college and college experiences are still largely unconnected.
- f. Any effort to more seriously improve academic success during the first college year must involve more of the faculty and must be legitimized by the disciplinary cultures and bodies which measure and determine the criteria for success and advancement of faculty in their subcultures. A central issue is faculty resistance to change and the resulting need to vastly increase faculty buy-in to these proposed first-year initiatives.
- g. The roles of campus chief executive, chief academic and chief financial officers, and trustees are also critical for mobilizing institutional change, for determining priorities, and for finding and allocating necessary personnel and fiscal resources; more attention must be paid to the knowledge of the first college year possessed by these four leadership categories and how they act upon this knowledge. In addition all important campus middle managers—deans and department heads—who either promote or inhibit change, must also be addressed in like fashion. Another key cohort is the institutional research professionals and other colleagues who are responsible for assessment and reaccreditation self-studies.
- h. The most dominant perception held by the public and its elected representatives in terms of where responsibility for college student learning/failure rests is that the problems we face in higher education attainment are most fundamentally due to the failure of college students to take sufficient responsibility for their own learning. Pat Callan's National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, in its 1999 report "Taking Responsibility," stated the following:
We also found agreement on what these leaders take to be the most serious problem facing higher education. For these leaders, the real obstacle is not the price tag, but the fact that many students are not sufficiently prepared to take advantage of a college education . . . the most critical factor in higher education is the responsibility taken by students themselves.
 While we recognize the enormous importance of student responsibility as a basis for their learning, we will not join in full agreement this chorus of student bashing and blaming the victim. Instead, we believe that responsibility has to be jointly and equally shared by the postsecondary institutions that have admitted these students and by the students themselves.
- i. The first college year should be transformational; pedagogies of engagement are known, necessary, and desirable, and student learning in the first year also must be tied to issues of civic concern.
- j. The foundation of all the outcomes we desire from American higher education, for better or worse, is laid in the first college year. Unfortunately, most campuses have very little research-based data on the effectiveness of their first college year, and thus more assessment of that year (and the tools to do so) is in order.

We Are Committed to Equity

2-25-13

Several years ago my wife and I made our first visit to South Africa and we noted and I blogged at the time about my strong reaction to the repeated references I heard to the importance of social justice. The main thrust of my observation was that we used to talk that way in the United States, back in the 60's and 70's but rarely do I hear such language in the 21st century, even on college and university campuses. And when I do, it is only on campuses in the bluest of the blue states.

I am reminded of and write about this again today because I am writing this posting after a two-day visit to a Canadian research university. I have just spent an intensive interactive experience with about 65 faculty, administrators, staff and students sequestered in a fairly confined meeting space. So I was able to hang on every word.

And the one word I heard repeatedly, that I don't hear in similar settings in my country was the word "equity." The word was used in the context of why this institution could or could not do certain things—because they either would or would not support the national commitment to "equity." As was put to me multiple times: "We are committed to equity." I just don't hear my fellow Americans talking that way.

I lived in Canada for five years when I was a child. I had an excellent education there. And I have visited twenty of so Canadian post secondary institutions in my adult life and hosted numerous Canadian/American conferences on the first year. So, more than most Americans I consider myself understanding of and sensitive to the elements of Canadian history and culture. I know how much more carefully they observe us, follow us, and think about us and our influence than we do them. And while they love to visit Florida and Arizona in the winter, they definitely do not want to be like us.

And one of the ways they do not want to be like us is our retreat from the national goal of equity. They are very aware of the enormous differences of distribution of wealth in the US and how this plays out in disparities in higher education access, resources, attainment, and so many other areas of American life.

I leave Canada reflecting on the meaning, significance and power of just that one little word. And I am reminded that for my adult professional life I have been pursuing my own version of equity: justice for first-year students. I am encouraged that my readers share this commitment with me.

How Would I Find A Mentor?

3-4-13

I am writing this several days after attending the 32nd annual First-Year Experience Conference. During that event several educators raised the point with me about the importance of mentoring and, more specifically, how does one go about finding a mentor? Sounds like a simple question. Some of us who have naturally fallen into a mentoring process by the good fortune of having someone offer to be a mentor may find it hard to understand why someone would even have to ask how to find a mentor.

While I don't have any empirical data on this, my experience suggests to me that most of my fellow higher educators if they have been mentored at all, have been in an informal relationship structure and not one that the institution intentionally provided. This is in spite of the fact that there are enough academic studies to justify colleges and universities establishing formal mentoring structures. The evidence is compelling; those organizations that have such have higher employee morale, see less turnover, and more rapid upward employee mobility. And this is particularly important for women and members of other underrepresented groups.

Of course, this also relates to the field of student success where we have long realized the importance of providing at least one significant "other" for every entering college student. This could be an academic advisor, classroom instructor, counselor, or peer mentor. And we know after forty years of looking at the impact of college that the greatest influence on students during the college years is the influence of other students. This would suggest the special importance of students mentoring students—and of having the students you want mentoring students doing that!

That was what really struck Betsy Barefoot and I when we were working on the research study, "Institutions of Excellence" back in 2002. In our study we had the privilege and pleasure to study the unique approach to the first year at the United States Military Academy, where every first-year student is assigned an upper class mentor. What is particularly unique about this structure is that the mentor, the more advanced student, is held accountable for the performance of the mentee. Just imagine the impact if we could replicate that mentoring model in conventional higher education settings! That would enable us to intentionally teach students how to be responsible as the core learning objective. A colleague of mine, Dr. Michael Siegel, now of Suffolk University, and I wrote a case study of the West Point mentoring model and other elements of their first-year (Plebe) experience, which was published in the 2005 Jossey-Bass book, [Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College](#) (Barefoot, Gardner, et al)

When I was teaching the first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina one of our recommended assignments for the students was one that would result in the "mentor paper." We tasked each student with viewing the first term of college as a period in which success, both immediate and longer term, would be engendered by the selection of a mentor. We discussed why to select one, how to do so, and who might be possible mentors. And then we required the students to submit an end-of-term paper describing the mentoring relationship they had entered and its outcomes to date. I would tell my students if they couldn't find anyone else, they would be stuck with me in this role. One of the persistent outcomes from University 101 for forty years now is higher retention rates for course participants. Mentoring may be a factor in this outcome.

Back to the original question: how to find a mentor? One consideration is whether or not to seek one who is also an employee of the same organization that employs you—let's call this an internal mentor. There are pros and cons to that. The pros: this person will know the organization well and the other players. Cons: there are things you ideally might want to share but may not wish to divulge. An additional consideration there would be whether to find a person in the immediate unit in which you are appointed or another unit in the institution but not in your reporting lines. Another possibility, of course, is to select someone in a comparable specialty but not employed at the same institution. A further alternative would be to select somebody whose personhood and accomplishments you admire but is of some entirely different profession. I think there should be some common features to any of these types of individuals, including:

- they are at least a half to full generation older than you
- they have core values that are consistent with your own
- they have demonstrated themselves to be trustworthy
- they have shown a pronounced inclination to the sponsorship of others
- they have accomplished themselves in ways that you respect, and are perhaps replicable by you
- they are approachable

- you have heard them speak about someone who mentored them

For reasons I do not fully understand, I think people feel awkward about asking someone to accept them in a mentor/mentee relationship. Perhaps the concern is that the person being asked may think there is something less than fully desirable about the person asking because the request reveals that no one has yet adopted the person as a mentee. Personally, I think that reaction is highly unlikely. Instead of anticipating that presenting such a request would be potentially embarrassing, I think a more appropriate and accurate way of looking at this is to view it as extending a very high compliment to the person being asked. This doesn't exactly happen every day. And a person who has accomplished significantly to deserve being a mentor will know how to react and put the requestor at ease. One of any mentor's qualities should be empathy and there is likelihood the mentor made a similar request some time previously of someone else, and then benefited significantly from that mentorship.

I entitled this piece "How would I find a mentor?" I never answered that question with respect to myself. My first mentor, my first President at the University of South Carolina, found me. He adopted me. I never had to ask him. But I certainly did thank him and honor him. He made a death bed request of me not to ever give up my work on the first year. And I am honoring that today some 32 years later. My next mentor was my Dean. And he adopted me too. I also had a fellow student mentor when I was in college, who was a year ahead of me. Later in our lives, we reversed roles and I mentored him. I could go on. I have had a long list of mentors and I never asked one of them. But I realize I am different in this regard. So if you don't have one, I urge you to become more intentional about this and ask someone. As I used to tell my students when I was teaching them the principles of public speaking, about which they were terrified: "what is the worst thing that could happen to you if this doesn't go well?" Asking someone to mentor you should be relatively low stakes if you don't receive the desired outcome.... and potentially high stakes if you do.

Everybody Gets It: The Completion Agenda

3-10-13

This posting is inspired by something I have started doing in the autumn of my career—going to an annual meeting for Presidents. After all, I am a president of a non-profit organization that serves American higher education and this means that many of the people my Institute staff colleagues and I are serving are presidents and chancellors.

The meeting in particular is higher education's oldest gathering for its senior leaders, the annual meeting of The American Council on Education. This is the academy's most senior policy advocacy stakeholder group.

And this year's annual meeting was all about The Completion Agenda: the intense focus on increasing graduation and completion rates. Everybody seemed to get the importance of this, all except I suppose the elites for whom this has never been a problem. The idea of this being the preoccupying focus of any meeting when I started my work on "the freshman year experience" back in the 1970's would have been unthinkable. So I tell myself that even though my country is retreating from most components of the social justice agenda, that it least it is focused on the completion agenda. And I am thankful for that.

But does everybody get it? Well, of course not. The senior leaders get it. But there are many in the academy that are not invested in this issue. And who might they be?

Well, they are the faculty and staff in institutions that are experiencing very rapid growth rates seemingly no matter what the state of student success practices. When the students keep coming no matter what we do, it is understandable that some of us educators don't really have to buy into the completion agenda. And then there is the professoriate. Many of us still think in these ways, understandably I could argue:

1. What is all this fuss about? Many of today's students do not belong in college. They lack the requisite levels of maturity and academic preparation, and focus, too.
2. I don't really understand why retention/completion is any of my responsibility. Instead, it's the responsibility of parents, families, and the admissions officers who should be recruiting me better students. And it definitely is the responsibility of the students themselves.
3. All this talk about retention is really the substitution of a business model for an educational paradigm for what we should be doing in higher education. This counting of students for revenue purposes is just one more insidious example of the corporatization of the academy and I am not having any of it.
4. This talk about retention and completion: completion for what? The discussion totally misses the purposes of higher education to which I have dedicated my whole professional life.
5. This focus on retention/completion is just one further example of the dumbing down of the academy. And I am not having any part of it.
6. Retention is an absolute minimum standard for students. It says nothing about what they are learning; what they can do; what value we have added. Surely we can have a more substantive conversation and resulting set of goals for higher education than this minimalist approach.
7. The question shouldn't be "what can/should we do to retain more students?" It should be: "What can we do to increase student learning?" Or "What would we have to do to create an excellent first year of college? If we did that, we could greatly increase our retention!"

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not blaming my faculty colleagues for not getting on the completion agenda bandwagon. They have thoughtful objections concerns about this focus and must be heard. If we don't address these ways of looking at our completion agenda challenges we can never be more successful. I understand why many of my colleagues view this student success work in these lights. This is a challenge I embrace. Long live academic freedom so that all of us are more explicit, honest and purposeful about the purposes of higher education. We must constructively address these skeptics about the merits of the completion agenda.

Teaching Used to Make Me Sick

3-15-13

In the most recent issue of The Chronicle there was a huge spread about the challenges of teaching developmental English in an urban, DC area community college. Very moving piece actually which included a profile on the instructor. He revealed to the reporter that early in his teaching career he became physically ill from his nervousness about teaching—as in sick to his stomach, vomiting. This reminded me of my mild anxiety attacks and accompanying nausea when I first started teaching. But it led to an epiphany.

In January of 1967 I arrived at my permanent Air Force duty assignment, as a psychiatric social worker, at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. As I have written about before in one of these postings, my squadron commander gave me a direct order to do college teaching and proceeded to arrange to make it happen. Two weeks later I started teaching my first college class, a night class, on a Friday night, at a regional two-year campus of the University of South Carolina. My class was at 7.30. My work day in the Psychiatric Clinic ended at 4.30 and I had to hit the road for a 65 mile drive on rural, two lane roads through what then I regarded as the heart of darkness. In those days there were still signs on restaurant doors pronouncing “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone” and I knew that meant liberal Yankees like me.

For the first 6-8 weeks or so of teaching what was my first college course, I was so nervous, and I mean really anxious, that I had no appetite at all. I could not eat. Actually, I was nauseous. And I didn't need therapy myself to know that was going on. My self-administered diagnosis was what the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (the DSM, my professional bible in that period of my life) labeled “adult situational reaction.” I was just one week ahead of my students every week in terms of my preparation. I felt I was clueless about what I was doing. I had not had any instruction at all about being an effective college teacher. All I knew were my own professors for models, and I remembered the best and worst of them vividly. Yes, college teaching was making me sick. Thank goodness I didn't experience these symptoms any other time of the week except immediately before going to class.

And then suddenly, after 6-8 weeks or so, my symptoms abated and I became asymptomatic. I allowed myself to have dinner before I taught. And because this was 1967 almost 20 years before we raised the legal drinking age to 21, I also allowed myself to go out with some of my students after class ended at 10.00PM and, yes, drank with my students, and, of course, talked with them (that's it).

So had happened to me? How had I overcome my anxiety?

I guess the first thing was that I learned that thorough preparation for a stress inducing event is one way to manage stress and its symptoms.

Secondly, recognizing that public speaking is one of Americans' greatest fears, and remembering my grade in Speech 101 was a D, I realized that anxiety often accompanies feelings of lack of control. The assumption in this case is incorrect, and that is that the speaker, the professor, has no ability to control his audience and their reactions. I quickly was learning that there were all kinds of things I could legitimately do to, in effect, “control” the reactions of my students to my communication in the anxiety producing process of public speaking.

But I think that what was really most responsible for my loss of anxiety and nausea before teaching was that I had had an epiphany!

I had discovered the most pleasing thing of my life, college teaching. I had never before done anything that was so much fun. And I had discovered that was because college teaching involves the four things I loved to do the most. I put that observation in the context of being a 23 year old, healthy, red blooded, heterosexual, young, single, man. The one thing I loved to do the most was not a sexual act. I am being totally honest, maybe even TMI. Teaching brought me pleasure much longer than sex and I could do it guilt free with many people, simultaneously too. And it was teaching that led me to discover something I had never discovered in college or graduate school.

To teach, I had to do the four things I most loved to do.

First of all, in order to teach you have to have some knowledge, and information to impart to your students. Ideally you might throw in some wisdom and experience but at 23 years of age I am not sure I had a lot of

wisdom or experience. But I did have knowledge which I had gotten from reading. So the first thing I loved to do in order to teach was read. And I was a reader. I had always been a reader. I loved reading. It had never occurred to me that I could be paid for reading. There was no such thing at my little liberal arts college known as "career planning" in which a career counselor might have helped me discover that ideal occupational choice involves doing something professionally and for remuneration that you love to do. OK, first thing then is reading.

Secondly, in order to teach you have to write something down after you have read—and that writing becomes the notes, the text, the manuscript, you use in teaching. And I loved to write. And I was getting paid, albeit modestly, \$500 a course, to write.

Thirdly, teaching required first reading, then writing, and then speaking. I knew I was an extrovert. I knew I had always loved to talk. And teachers have to talk, after they have read (or done something) to acquire knowledge, and written down that knowledge.

And finally, the fourth component of teaching I discovered was helping students. And I really enjoyed helping my students. I had discovered that college teaching is a "helping" profession.

So there I had it. I had moved from doing something that made me sick to something that showed me how to put together the four things I most loved to do: reading, writing, talking and helping people.

How are you helping your students discover how to convert the things they most love to do into a legal way to eventually earn a living?

Academic Probation: Getting On is Much Easier Than Getting Off!

4-4-13

Almost always when I visit a campus and have a scheduled meeting with a group of students, there has been some vetting involved in whom I meet with. It would be very uncommon for a host for my visit to schedule me with a group of the most unsuccessful students. But that's exactly whom I need to talk to on occasion, and not only to remind me of my own very inauspicious beginnings in college.

Like all of us who went to college I have an alma mater. Mine is Marietta College. And I am pleased to see and say that they are doing more for students who are academically deficient in the first term of college than many places I know about. These students are either offered, or in some cases required, to take a two-credit college success course during their second term of college. I was placed on academic probation after my first term at Marietta and all I received was a letter to that effect giving me one semester only to get my act together. And I did and got off academic probation. That was a life changing and life saving transition experience.

Recently I met via SKYPE with two groups of these students at Marietta College, about nine to a group. They were disproportionately male, minority, and student athlete. But they were all very approachable and I thought receptive to having a conversation with a interested stranger about their initial college experiences.

So what do you say to students who are on academic probation? What is to be learned from them? I am not sure what is the best thing to say to them but my approach was/is to practice some honest self-disclosure, share my own miserable first-term, and see what we might have in common. Often when I talk with students I note and reflect on the ways in which their experiences are different from mine; but in the case of students on probation, I find their experiences are much more likely to be the same or very similar to mine.

I will share a few observations on our conversations:

1. Many of these students were overinvested in athletics. This did not surprise me. We all like to invest in those activities we are already good at and for which we get lots of attention and reinforcement, from both coaches and fellow players. If only more of us professors taught like coaches! A challenge is for institutions to give these students a commensurate amount of attention and support for their academic development. I could certainly relate to this, as I had been a varsity athlete too. As I told the students, my team sport experience was a motivator to stay in college to remain part of the group and to please a parent. They could relate to that. I also told them that ultimately to please myself I had to choose between being an athlete and a really good student. And I couldn't do both and get enough sleep. So I gave up the sport. This all comes around to purpose.
2. The real elephant in the room for all these students was/is purpose: why am I here, at this college, at this time, doing these things, with these people? I told them that if they could sort that out anything was possible. I also gave them suggestions as to the types of experiences and people who could help them do just that. And I shared with them that initially my purpose was to please my father with whom I had made a deal with to go to college for one year after which time I could quit if I wanted and he would get off my back! So this got the students to consider for whom were they in college?
3. Another common theme was coming from urban/suburban areas to a rural, isolated place. And that's really tough. I shared with them that women usually do better at that because of their greater ability to hunker down and create engaging and supportive relationships wherever they are. The students had mixed views of which gender might be better at doing this but I told them what the research has shown are the advantages that accrue to women. A key to success of course is being here now, making the most of where you are, especially with and through the people around you.
4. This got us to homesickness. I told them I could write the book on that. I was really homesick, in part because of a romantic relationship back home. We considered the pros and cons of that. The instructor of the class asked each student to send me after our conversation some feedback about their reactions and what they might have learned, if anything. This point about the significant other back home really spoke to a number of them. For these students the on-campus residential college experience, geographically removed from their home of origin, had not yet clicked. Overall, on campus residence is a significant predictor for college success and completion, but not yet for these students.
5. Students on academic probation are good at asking questions. They are, as they should be, questioning everything. Why am I here? How did I get in this mess? What can I do to get off? Do I have what it takes? What strengths do I have at all in my interests outside academics that might also

apply to academics? I think that one of the things we need to do more intentionally is to put these students in group settings where they can explore precisely these questions, think about them, talk about them, write about them, and make some decisions about them.

6. These students wanted to know, of course, what they did to get on academic probation and how to get off. The first part of that I explained by attribution to my homesickness, depression, not getting any help because none was available, missing my girlfriend back home, and lacking the right kind of college level study skills. How did I get off? By the serendipitous adoption of me by an older student who mentored me in the art and craft of study skills, especially note taking; by getting a new academic advisor, one who believed in and liked me; and by picking my courses by professors, upon the advice of my advisor and student mentor, professors who would be more likely to engage me intellectually, which is exactly what they did. I was pleasantly surprised by the feedback I received from the students on the subject of note taking. I had described for them my semi miraculous improvement of grades once I learned how to take lecture notes and use them to predict the examination questions. They wanted me to explain this could be the case and I explained that in explicit detail. It's not rocket science but it really is important and they got it. Yes, we would all agree that many entering college students don't have the requisite study skills. But that's because they have not been taught those skills. And when they are, they can learn them and be successful. And I'm living proof. So I told the students if I could do it, so could they.
7. And, of course, these students wanted to discuss the challenges of picking a program of study and how to relate that to occupational choice. While many of us who teach in the liberal arts may wish our students were not so vocationally oriented, it is very understandable that they are. We really have to address this much earlier and more intentionally. This all relates to motivation.
8. I was asked some very good questions. The one I liked the best was really a request to define what I would mean by "excellence" in the beginning college experience. The questioner learned that professors don't often give simple or succinct answers to the most important questions. And I told them that in life the questions were often more important than the answers. I was also asked to reflect on my college experience and to report those experiences from which I had learned the most. That one was a tough one. But I told them that if forced to make the choice, the experience that was the greatest teacher was that of becoming a student activist in student government co-curricular activities, where I had many opportunities to put in place the thinking, writing, organizing, and visioning skills I was learning in the curriculum. I explained that it was in that context that I learned to do what I do now for a living: help colleges universities effect meaningful change.
9. I was also impressed by how many of the students wrote me subsequently to thank me for my candor—almost as if they aren't used to that. I think what they were commenting on was more than I would self disclose at all. And I also found it noteworthy that a number of them thanked me for "serving our country." This was in response to my telling them that I had been drafted after finishing college. My assumption is that few of them know anyone who has served recently in the armed forces. It also suggested to me that maybe they don't hear enough from other adults about the importance of serving their country—and that when they do, they don't find this aversive at all, to the contrary.

I guess the point of this piece is to suggest that you have your own dialog with some students on academic probation. I predict it will be salutary for them, and for you.

Checking in With Students

3-20-13

It's important to check in with students on a regular basis. Given the pace of their change, we can get out of touch very fast. I have reflected on the fact that some of the higher education leaders that have the greatest impact on students through their policy making authority and other forms of influence may rarely actually talk to students.

Decades ago, I taught Sociology 101. And one of the core introductory topics was that of social stratification. I remember having my students read a case study on "student nurses." One of the points of this reading was that many college students chose a major because of preconceptions about a professional occupation, in this case, nursing, thinking that it was going to be all about "helping people." But they quickly have to learn that in college it's all about the sciences. If you can't hack it in the sciences, you aren't going to get your degree. And then if they do earn a degree they have to learn that the paths to professional advancement take them further and further away from the people they initially wanted to help in the practice of nursing. That is to say they end up supervising others who are less well educated and may actually have little or no direct patient contact. The same parallels can be drawn with many other professions, including my own: higher education administration, change, and continuous improvement.

So, in my current role in higher education where I do strategic planning with colleges and universities to help them improve their performance with new and transfer students, I am no longer part of a single institution and thus do not have access to my own students. For me, that has been a very difficult adjustment, a form of withdrawal. Being the student-focused junkie that I am then, I have had to develop some counterbalancing strategies. One of them is asking my hosts for any campus I visit, often one a week, to arrange for me at least one session with students. This isn't ideal but it is much better than no student contact at all.

A few weeks ago I was on the campus of York College of City University of New York. York is a four-year, regional university, non-residential and very diverse. Very inspiring. I met with four students who were all members of a co-curricular student organization, the National Society of Leadership and Success, about which I had known nothing before this visit.

But in talking to these students, it quickly became apparent to me that it was the most meaningful thing they had done in college. These students were at different levels, first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior. One had transferred in from a SUNY community college. They were pursuing different majors. Two were male, two female. None of them were WASP's like me. But it struck me that all of them were having experiences in this group that were common, including:

- Very positive interaction with the faculty advisor, whom they mentioned frequently by name and with respect and affection. This professor has responsibility for the campus radio station.
- The aspiration, no matter what their ultimate occupation, to "give back" to their communities.
- A keener understanding of what exactly their "community" is, its needs and importance.
- A strong inclination to perform some form(s) of public service.
- The importance of developing "character", and staying true to that character.
- A variety of success oriented activities that led them to practice reflection about the course of their lives.
- A set of experiences that had led them to take greater control of their lives.
- A commitment to sustain the group and provide support for their fellow students to persist in college.
- An achieved comfort level in interacting with higher education faculty and staff.
- The development of interpersonal communication and assertiveness skills that further facilitated the self esteem and comfort level necessary to interact with University officials; things like a good handshake and eye contact.
- The realization that becoming successful as a college student means striving for more than being "popular".

As I interacted with these students I remembered that during the quarter century that I directed the University 101 first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina, many of the instructors, including me, would have as a course requirement, that the students were to join something—any group as long as it was sanctioned by the University and was engaging in legal behavior. We were aware of the research correlating group affiliation and college persistence and we wanted to intentionally bring about these outcomes. My visit to York was a much more

recent example of the power of group affiliation and the importance of encouraging/facilitating students joining such groups. Several of the students made reference to a Student Affairs officer who had told them about or literally had led them to join the group. What a hugely influential role that is. Most of us could be doing exactly this for our students.

And this reminded me once again: during the college years, the greatest influence on students is the influence of other students. That is far too important for us to leave that to chance.

Thank you, York College, for the reminder and illustration.

Travels with John

4-8-13

I visit campuses for a living. I visit campuses for fun. I visit campuses while on vacation, too.

Let me comment first on the latter point. Occasionally, when my wife, Betsy Barefoot and I are on vacation, driving somewhere, and we see a road sign for a college or a university that we have not visited officially (between us we have been on about 700 campuses), just for the fun of it we will get off the thoroughfare on which we were headed before impulsively deciding to check this new place out and we will go mystery shopping.

Usually that involves, for starters, walking into the Admissions Office and seeing how we are treated as we maintain our anonymity. This is sometimes very revealing. You ought to try it.

In fact, that is some advice that should apply to all of us in higher education, namely, that we ought to get out and see as many institutions as possible, for the primary purpose of putting our own institution in perspective.

Unfortunately, in large part, only the senior members of the academy get to travel much because they have access to funds to support such travel. This also varies by institutional type. In my experience there are two types of institutions where the faculty and professional staff tend to travel the least: 1) small, private, non-selective liberal arts colleges; and 2) community colleges. Financial resources plays a major role in both these contexts. Many of the small privates that I work with are especially insular. This is too bad. It means they lack sufficient insights into the nature of the institutions, particularly the public ones, which are their formidable competitors. As for the community colleges, they have inherited the secondary school culture from which so many of them emerged half a century ago and that predecessor culture uses what are known as "in-service" to provide faculty/staff development. What this means basically is that the educators, below the ranks of senior leaders, don't get to go anywhere and are "developed" by imported talent brought in to provide "in-service days", and also using in-house talent quite appropriately to perform the same function.

One possible strategy for alleviating this institutionalized and self perpetuating insularity would be to encourage the development of faculty/staff "exchanges" especially between institutional types.

As a higher educator I practice my profession in a very atypical manner in that I get to visit many campuses on a very regular basis. Many of these visits are with the institutions that are engaged in the signature work on our non-profit organization, a self-study, planning and improvement process. This enables me to be constantly learning by noting the similarities and differences between the institutions I visit. I will share just a few from my recent travels, none of which were of the "mystery shopping" genre.

I am so used to noting in student union buildings/centers a plethora of businesses, what our business and finance colleagues call "auxiliary enterprises" that seem to be trying to sell our students just about anything, that when I went in a student center recently where they weren't doing that, it really struck me as notable and commendable. This was a beautiful new student

center at Waubonsee Community College in Sugar Grove Illinois. My hat was off to the planners of this facility who actually left the overwhelming portion of the space to non-commercial purposes, such as a one stop shopping administrative commons for student services and really spacious seating areas for students to relax, eat, study, socialize, do group study at tables, etc. Good for these people.

Who Are We Doing this For?

4-9-13

This is a question I have been asking myself for years, and largely in the context of considering some proposed policy or action involving how my or some other institution is or is considering treating its students.

One of the biggest changes I have observed and thought about has been the movement over the past two decades to drive more and more support and information transmission functions "to the web." Americans loved technology long before the computer. In fact, my favorite American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, observed in the late 1840's: "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind."

Because I work primarily with colleges and universities that serve disadvantaged and underprepared, lower SES students, I constantly ask myself whether or not what we are trying to do for them, no matter how well intentioned, will further advantage—or disadvantage them.

And so as I observe how at most campuses we want to drive students to the web to glean what used to be found in print catalogues and what used to be explained by academic advisors in real time sessions, how we provide orientation, advising, registration, library help, you name it, all on line, I can't help but wonder who are we doing this for?

Are we doing this because it is more convenient for us?

Because it reduces the time we actually have to spend with students? Thus freeing us to do our real work....much of that also done using technology.

Because it is more convenient for the students?

It gives them 24/7 access as compared to the much more limited times we might be available to do this real time.

Because we believe that they really would prefer to get their information this way? Because it is more cost efficient?

Because it has enabled us to reduce staff resource allocations and hence expenditures?

Because we have been persuaded by the most recent purveyors of technology solutions to buy their products so we have the latest upgrade?

Because we believe—or want to believe those purveyors' promises of greater efficiency and even miraculous educational outcomes like improved student retention?

What about students who live in contexts where they cannot afford on-line access?

What about students for whom the economic inequality in this country means they cannot afford to have their own versions of the technology that we are now requiring them to use?

I ask these questions because I am still trying to practice a mantra that I learned and insisted I practice when I first became an academic administrator way back in 1974:

Thou shalt do your best to do for students what might be best for them as opposed to best for you or the ...(in my case, University).

Nobody Wants to Talk to Me Anymore!

4-14-13

I never had any idea that I could earn my living by talking, literally, until my squadron commander in the Air Force ordered me to perform community service, which he defined as being an adjunct college teacher for the University of South Carolina's budding extension system back in the 1960's. Higher educators weren't exactly rushing into South Carolina 3 years after the Civil Rights Act and so there were lots of vacancies.

When I got over my nervousness about teaching during the first six-eight weeks or so of my first college course, I realized that I was having a ball. And like a true academic, rather than just enjoying it I decided I would analyze my reactions. I had never had any career planning in college because it didn't exist then at small liberal arts colleges like the one I attended. So I had never been through any kind of exercise to get me thinking about the intersection of my values, activities that gave me pleasure, and possible vocational options. It didn't take too much thinking on my part though to realize that I had discovered in college teaching the four things I loved to do: talk, read, write and help people. And so I have earned my living for the past 46 years by talking.

But I find now people don't want to talk to me nearly as much. They don't call me anymore.

Instead, they either write me an e-mail or they go to the website hosted by the non-profit organization which I lead (www.jnqi.org). This is a difficult adjustment for me!

I get lots of e-mail messages asking me truly profound questions, to which any thoughtful reply would ideally take a book, or at least a book chapter. And I get these messages from people who would never call me. This is either because they are too far away—from all over the globe and its different time zones; or younger and much less senior people to me in terms of professional achievements and hence they perceive social distance. Actually, I would be happy to have anyone call me. I have always loved the telephone. This love affair began as a teenager when I used the phone to talk to my adolescent heart throbs, said conversations which my mother tried (often unsuccessfully) to monitor and curtail to get me to do my homework.

Seriously, it is common for me to get e-mail requests which say "Please tell me what needs to be done to improve the first-year experience." Great question. I have been working my whole adult life on it.

Or how about: "Please describe for me your style of leadership and provide illustrations of your achievements related to this style." I could write a novel about that. It could become the great academic trash novel.

Everything in my training as an academic developed in me this irrepressible urge to give complete, well developed, well supported answers. I developed this passion for substance. I came to love compound/complex sentences. Ask me to write 100 words and that is much more challenging than 10,000 or even 1000.

No doubt about it, the internet has leveled the playing field between the extroverts like me and those at the opposite end of the introversion/extroversion scale. I am happy to see the introverts liberated but I now feel lonely as the commercialized Maytag Repairman.

Recently my staff and I participated in a very important academic meeting as we have for many previous year. At this meeting we will have multiple presentation sessions and an exhibit booth. This year we had a significant reduction in booth traffic during which people could have come by and talked to us/me real time. But our website traffic during the same period as the conference went up dramatically, so much so I found it almost hard to believe. And that is what was the final straw inspiring this post. I am convinced. People would much rather, for many reasons, get their information on the web than have to interact real time, in conversation, with others. This process, now the norm, is much easier for the information seeker to control; it is perceived to be faster, more convenient and allowing privacy if the seeker doesn't want the information provider to know that the information is being sought. There are many people who must like it this way better, even though they can remember the old way of seeking information real time, in person, via conversation. And then there are many younger people who have never known any other way. Increasingly, those will be the only people populating our classes.

So what's a talker like me to do? Adjust. Find other outlets for talking. Enjoy the opportunities I still have with even more intentionality. And work hard to provide information for people now in the ways they most seem to want it. Of course, this is change. And my occupation is also about helping colleges change. But is it progress.....?

The academic in me would answer: "Well, it all depends....." And then I would be tempted to write a very long answer making sure I attempted to look at all possible sides of the question.

Students Give Me Hope and Inspiration

4-26-13

This posting is inspired by my attendance recently at a play at Blue Ridge Community College, in Hendersonville, N.C., which is about 20 miles from my and my wife's home. This was a production of the British drama classic, Pride and Prejudice. We had gone originally to see a friend and spouse of one of our office colleagues, Rick Huhn, perform in his rendition of the father character.

Of course, my readers would fully appreciate the commitment of our nation's community college to open door access and to the education of some of our least advantaged and least fortunate students. Typically these prior circumstances of our students are defined in terms of socio- economic status and level of academic preparation.

But in this particular performance what most caught my attention was that two of the five daughters in the plot were students with visible special conditions.

One female student acted as she sat in a wheel chair, the mechanical sophistication of which surely would not have been possible in the 19th century period she was portraying. And one of the ways she carried off her performance was to dance, literally, from her rapidly spinning, twirling wheel chair pirouetting around her happy male partner. Her face conveyed that mode of mobility could not possibly be construed as anything other than perfectly normal, which for her it was. And her face and entire body conveyed the maximum possible bliss that anyone could derive from dancing. I later learned that this student had a spinal injury from an automobile accident.

And simultaneously there was another student actress, sister, who performed with a special partner, namely, a trained dog, the kind used to protect people with a history of seizures.

So there these two students were, at the same time, having the times of their lives and giving the same to an appreciative audience.

I came away from this even more fully appreciating so many things about our students: their diversity, courage, abilities, optimism, tenacity, perseverance and joie de vivre.

And I came away really appreciating this open door college for having an obviously not well funded theater program at all, but at least they had one; and for giving these students such an affirming developmental experience, that was truly educational and inspirational for many members of the audience I am sure.

We can never be reminded too often that our students should be a source of inspiration for us all.

What Were My Observations This Time?

5-13-13

Since I began my other life as a part-time, but still serial, blogger a few years ago, I have considered myself more and more to be a reporter of sorts, a foreign correspondent for the US higher education student success movement when I travel abroad. There is no better way for me to reflect on my own country and its higher education system than through foreign travel. And because I work for an independent non-profit organization which is not dependent on the traditional academic calendar, I have much better control of my calendar and can finally take vacations at the best times for my wife and me, which are most often those times that many other higher educators are still "in session." So we become accustomed to taking vacations in the "shoulder" seasons: just after the official summer has ended and schools have resumed, say the first two weeks in September; or early to mid January just after school has resumed again; and/or late April, early May, before the official summer holiday season. Sounds like we don't like kids doesn't it and are taking vacations at times when we can most likely avoid them! Not true. We love kids. But these shoulder reasons are really superb for travel because the weather is ideal, temperate; destinations are less crowded; often rates have not yet gone up for peak season, etc.

So the latest trip of this travelling blogger correspondent was very briefly in Milan, Italy, to visit the world famous LaScala opera house (for a ballet!) and then on to the Cote d'Azur in southern France, April 26-May 10, 2013. Some thoughts from this time out of country:

- The Italians are even more disillusioned with their government than we are with ours. Youth unemployment is a huge problem and many university graduates are having to leave home and country to find work elsewhere especially in the EU. Younger Italians know that they will not enjoy the same level of benefits from their country's social safety net system as have their parents.
- Every generation of parents want their children to live better than they have. This is less likely to be the ultimate outcome in Italy, France, and the US, the three countries in reference. So are we educating our students to live lives the quality of which may be measured by indicators other than material accumulation?
- The European train system is a marvel. It would represent a huge difference in the US way of life if we were to commit to mass transit other than providing the most governmental support for the aviation industry.
- It is apparent why the Europeans live longer than we Americans; they have profoundly different dietary habits; they exercise more; lead lives of lower stress; vacation more; spend more times with their families.
- While both Italy and France have become very secular, France, for example, celebrates a national holiday forty days after Easter to mark what is believed to be the ascension of Christ. . We have no such holiday in the United States. This year that date fell immediately following the annual French holiday commemorating the end of World War II (always May 8). While we too officially sanctify the idea of separation of church and state, we too have official holidays for events central to the Christian tradition: Christmas and Easter.
- In every town in France, no matter what the size, there is a prominently placed monument recording the names of the dead who served France in both World Wars, especially World War One. This would not be true of the United States. Most American college students have little if any idea what the long term effects of the American participation in World War II were in terms of how we live now (for example, as a racially integrated society thanks to the Civil Rights movement which was given huge impetus by the return home of African American veterans who had fought to defeat racist fascism and could no longer tolerate it at home).
- Even if we required every American college student to take required courses in art history and art appreciation, it is hard for me to imagine my fellow citizens ever having the level of interest in, respect for, and willingness to invest public funds to display art. On this trip we found significant displays of public art even in public parking garages, the most uninteresting, uninspiring public spaces in America!

- It is finally becoming apparent to an ever widening sector of the population in all three countries that the official governmental policies of “austerity” are not working; are making citizens suffer needlessly; are not contributing to economic recovery; are actually delaying a full and more normal recovery; and were the products of unproven dogma inflicted upon the rest of us by conservative ideologues.
- The average French citizens we talked to weren’t happy with their government either, one whose leadership was elected on May 6, 2012, when we were also in France. Poor Prime Minister Hollande: he can’t please his own Socialist party on the left; and he certainly can’t please those on the right. His poll numbers are terrible and he is perceived as lacking leadership direction. But these same citizens love our Obama!
- In the tourist service economy, we met young, university educated students working in the hospitality industry. They truly are much more mobile and bi-lingual than our students. They have an enormous advantage of being members of the 17 nation European Community which enables them to work on their passport, and receive social welfare benefits, anywhere in the EU. Just imagine if our students had such freedoms!
- We met plenty of obviously middle class citizens who drove upscale taxi cabs, a more prized occupation by far in Europe than the US. These individual transportation entrepreneurs can afford to not be employees of major corporations and/or government agencies because they enjoy the benefits of universal health care regardless of their occupations. These workers travel widely themselves and all we met had the money to visit the US regularly—and do.
- Higher education institutions are not nearly so visible. You do not notice nearly the same extent of public space and signage devoted to pose secondary education as you would customarily see in the US.
- For men, in France, it remains a much higher status occupation to be a career restaurant server, in upscale establishments, than would be the case in the US. And it is obvious that women are discriminated against and much less likely to serve in these roles. These men see themselves as members of a long standing “profession” which gives a whole different meaning to the concept of “service” than in the US. And, again, as with the taxi drivers, these workers can pursue this profession and be eligible for universal health benefits.
- In establishments where we experienced cultural elements of France unimaginable in the US, such as contemporary stylish architecture in public spaces, abundant lavish use of colors, a love for high fashion in clothing, amazing varieties of wines, cheeses, deserts, —all examples of prized French cultural achievement, we would still hear ubiquitous American music.
- Gross illustrations of economic inequality such as homelessness, people living in substandard housing, panhandling, were much, much less visible to me than in my own country. I was in France almost two weeks and only once did I see a French version of a “trailer park” and their version looked much more stabile in terms of the structural appearance of the modular homes than I would see in my American south.

Two of the disciplines that were most intellectually liberating for me as a college student were sociology and anthropology. Nothing else I studied yielded for me a fuller appreciation for the range of possible human behaviors and creations that we have come to know as “culture”, broadly defined. I am reminded on each trip abroad, how much more I have yet to learn and how when I do, it puts my own country in perspective. And that perspective reminds me of the socially redeeming value of my profession of higher educator.

How Do We End the Term—for Ourselves? A Closure Checklist

5-15-13

It is commencement season again, that is for those of us on the semester system, and for our colleagues on the quarter system, their turn will soon come. It is the season of final exams, make-up exams, grading, submitting final grade reports, award ceremonies, final advising for course selection for next academic year, end-of-term department meetings, faculty development activities, and other kinds of closure events for both students and their higher educators.

Understandably, the academy is more focused on providing closure events, rituals, ceremonies, as it should be, for our students.

But we need these too. And these are getting harder to come by because more and more of all us don't really have the summer "off" as in the traditional agrarian model of schooling from K-16. And you add to that consideration the fact that our masters can keep demanding our attention through technology, which for most of us is never "off", and it really is harder and harder to have closure at the end of an academic year or cycle.

For the past two spring terms, I ended them, so to speak, by going with my wife to Europe, and immersing myself in very different cultures than those in which I live and work in the States.

These periods have been helpful to me in reflecting what have I accomplished in the academic year just finished and what new directions shall I forge ahead in for the coming year. Perhaps the most important things I do are simply changing my daily pace and separating myself in time and space from my regular demands and especially from my dominant US cultural influences.

But realizing that the majority of my readers are practicing academics who do work in post secondary education settings, what are some generic strategies that I could suggest for end-of-term closure for us? Here's a possible check list:

Try writing a commencement address, one that you could actually give to students? Or give to yourself? Your adult significant other(s)? Make this partially a perspectives check. How do you see the academy functioning these days for your students? And for you this year? I have written a number of this fabled genre and find it to be an interesting and productive intellectual exercise.

Ask for some formal feedback from someone you report to about how your year has gone?

More importantly, and much lower stakes, **have a series of conversations with colleagues**, either individually or in groups about the year we have just finished. Reflect on it and ourselves during its passage.

Engage in reflection yourself, in solitary fashion. Create some guiding questions. Record some observations. Decide if you will share any of these with anyone? Consider: what did you learn this year? What worked well for you, and the opposite? Who were your most successful students? What were your most successful activities, accomplishments?

And what about your institution? How do you think it performed this year in the ways that matter most to you and that you are best able to judge? What is the impact on you

of your institution's performance this year?

Use your reflections to set some goals for the coming year. Decide what you need to do over the coming summer hiatus, should you be so fortunate to have one, to pursue the implementation of your goals for next year.

Got A Plan for New Student Success?

5-22-13

Well, of course, we should assume any post secondary institution that wants to be more successful with its new—either first-time or transfer—students, would have a plan to accomplish this. But in my four decades plus experience, I find that very few institutions do. And, while most all institutions have a strategic plan, my work tells me that many are weak on the execution of such aspirational plans.

I am thinking about this because June 30 is my non-profit organization's annual deadline for applications for a process we have been offering for 10 years, known as Foundations of Excellence® (FoE, for short). Very succinctly stated, FoE is a comprehensive, institution-wide, assessment, planning and action process to improve student success and retention. While I wish I could tell you that student success was the number one driver, it is really more selfishly from the institution's perspective, an effort to improve student retention, which really means institutional retention. And that's exactly what it does! That is FoE significantly improves retention if you do two very simple, but important things: 1) develop an aspirational plan for improvement; and 2) then execute that plan to a high degree.

A foundation of Excellence was made possible by grants from three foundations: The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and Lumina Foundation for Education.

From 2003-2005 we had 219 four-year institutions involved in a pilot and 88 community colleges involved in another pilot, to produce what we called "Founding Institutions."

Since 2003 we have had 245 post secondary institutions go through the Foundations of Excellence process. Of this total, 136 have been four-year institutions and 109 community colleges. All but four of the cohorts have been from the continental US. But four institutions came from Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. What we had originally set out to do was to develop a process that would be applicable, effective, and work anywhere in the world where post secondary institutions wanted to be more effective with their students.

So what's the secret sauce to go through a process like this to increase student retention? At the risk of oversimplification, the recipe includes:

1. You have to have a set of [aspirational standards](#) of excellence. You can use ours, gratis. They are out there on our website.
2. You have to create a task force to conduct a thorough assessment of the effectiveness of your first year.
3. You should measure your institution's current effectiveness against some standards of excellence for the first year or transfer student experience. For each of the standards you need a set of questions to be asking yourselves in order to apply these standards to your unique institutional circumstances. Our process provides these and we call them "Performance Indicators."
4. You need to involve a substantial proportion of faculty to be engaged in this process if you want the outcomes to be institutionalized. In addition to faculty, you want to bring together academic administrators, student affairs professionals, IR and assessment experts, and students.
5. Your process needs to be data driven whereby you produce recommended action items for institutional improvement based on the evidence you have marshaled about your current levels of performance.
6. The process needs to result in an action plan.
7. You then have to execute that plan to a high degree.

Confessions of a Repentant Blogger

6-15-13

I confess. I have fallen by the wayside. I have let my readers down. Haven't written a posting for a number of weeks now. I feel badly about this. When I took this on about five years ago I did so after being badgered by a staff member in my non-profit organization that was/is about 35 years younger than me. She told me this would be a good thing to do; that I would enjoy it; that others would enjoy reading my thoughts; that it would personalize me to many people who only knew me or knew of me professionally. So I relented and became a blogger.

Most of my brief life as a blogger I have enjoyed. It has affected my consciousness by making me think often about what I could report. So I have found myself engaging in even more reflective thinking than I might have otherwise because I knew I had an obligation to report such. And especially when I am travelling out of our country I have come to think of myself as a kind of foreign correspondent. It has made me see things and think about things I might not have focused on in this intentional manner otherwise.

But my version of being a blogger is an obligation. A significant obligation. And I have really not been meeting it recently. It is a multi-faceted obligation. It is one of thinking, devoting time and energy, and, of course, writing.

And my primary duties as a nonprofit org CEO have recently had me doing an extraordinary amount of writing on other matters. I just haven't had the time I needed.

Excuses, excuses. I wouldn't accept them from me if I were one of my students.

I once was asked by an older, wiser, mentor of mine, who I was about to go to work for, if I had any "enemies." Fascinating question. This is when I was working full time at the University of South Carolina. I thought about the question and came back with two names. One was the Athletic Director, whom I had come to blows with over treatment of first-year student athletes. And one of my trademarks at USC was to serve as the self-appointed spokesperson and advocate for the needs of first-year students. If I hadn't been a tenured full professor, I suspect this guy and his Board allies would have had me fired. But nope, I left, but really never left and never will, on my own volition. Second was the University Librarian. He and I had fought many battles over such high stakes as his wanting to expel a student for stealing one issue of Sports Illustrated. I was chairing the Faculty/Student Discipline Committee back in the days when faculty still sat in judgment of students who committed major infractions of the student discipline code. And I refused to push for expulsion. The Librarian never forgave me. I was a coddler of criminals. And we had another fight too over whether or not my University 101 classes could have tours of the Library. He was adamant that they could not because they would come in and talk; and libraries were to be places of silence. So with help from a special colleague (Professor Jerry Jewler) we developed something called the "silent library tour". The students toured, but could not talk. This Librarian once told my future boss and mentor that "The problem with John Gardner is he has only one speed: full speed ahead." And he was absolutely right.

So when I agreed to become a blogger I only knew one speed: full speed ahead. And in recent weeks I just haven't been able to maintain that so I didn't maintain at all. And I guess I just told myself that if I couldn't do it my usual full speed ahead then I wouldn't do it at all.

For me, blogging is partially about writing about what is most on my mind. And right now the take over of the formally centrist state of North Carolina by the political party that was never really in power in North Carolina, has become a central preoccupation for me mentally. They are acting out a playbook for their vision for what America could and should look like. And I and thousands of other North Carolinians are just shocked. But this blog of mine was never meant to be a political organ. I have a colleague on our staff who helps me by formatting my blog postings,

Leave the Place a Little Bit Better...

7-8-13

I wish that there was a formal ceremony to commence a career in higher education in which a new professional would have to take an oath. There is a ceremony of course and that is usually a commencement at which the educator receives an advanced degree of some kind. I am thinking of an oath that says more than "Do no harm!" When I started my higher education career it was because my commanding officer in the US Air Force ordered me to do some college teaching as a form of "community service." I was told that community service was expected of me. And it was the first time anyone in authority had ever said that to me and I already had two college degrees at age 22. I didn't have to take an oath, other than the oath I had already taken to defend the Constitution!

I have speculated on what kind of an oath I would recommend. As context, I realize that most young professionals in my field do not envision themselves staying at one institution for the entirety of their career. I did spend an entire career at one institution even though I didn't set out to do that. This was in spite of my father's constant upbringing mantra for me: "Son, find a good company and stick with it", like he did, for 43 years. When I started I viewed my young life in South Carolina as a kind of adventure on what for me was a new frontier, in the south, 3 years after the Civil Rights Act. I was fortunate enough to eventually land a full-time teaching appointment at the University of South Carolina; and then got into the teaching and directing of University 101; was awarded tenure; and then a full professorship; and then launched the national conference series on the Freshman Year Experience; and then established the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. And so without a grand career plan, one thing led to another and I ended up spending 32.5 years as a public servant to the state of South Carolina. I know that most young professionals won't just let their careers unfold at one place. Many of them will have some kind of intentional game plan (unlike me). They will pursue the more normative societal, now corporate, model of upward social mobility which argues that to move up you have to move out and move on and also up. So in this kind of new culture, what might an appropriate oath be? Upon consideration, I think it could still be the same as the one I think I could have sworn and lived up to.

My motto would have been: "Leave the place a little better than you found it." That is a reasonable, modest, achievable aspiration I believe. And it wouldn't take an entire career like I gave to attain.

When we arrive at an institution we come into a particular historic context in the time of the country, the state, the region, and especially the institution. The institution preceded us. And it will succeed us. So what very concretely could we do to leave it a little bit better (and at the same time do no harm)?

When I started doing my first teaching at the University of South Carolina it was during the period when the state was just beginning to rejoin the union; it was trying slowly to become a little more like the rest of the United States. The political establishment was run by what I would now call "white moderates" in comparison to those in charge now. I arrived three years after the Civil Rights Act and two years after the Voting Rights Act. And it was in the middle of the Vietnam War, and the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the students' rights movement. It was an exciting time.

I am not sure at what point I became conscious that I was intending to leave the place a little bit better. But I know that eventually that became my purpose. And I knew that I couldn't do that alone. I would have to have the help of many, many friends and colleagues.

So, in what ways did I leave the place a little bit better?

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

7-2-13

During a previous International Conference on the First Year Experience I heard a presentation by an academic administrator from an experimental college, designated as "Arctic College", that the Canadian federal government had established for its Inuit people in the Northwest Territories - that vast region of tundra that is larger than the United States.

In their sincere desire to bring higher education to this highly isolated population the government built a new campus below the tundra and when it opened the campus it flew its first class in from all over the North West Territory. This meant that the students were being put into a totally new physical environment. Just one problem with this: there were trees. These students weren't used to trees. Instead they were accustomed to being able to see as far as their vision permitted, in the daytime, across the vast expanse of very flat tundra. And soon after they arrived in this new setting, hundreds of miles from their ancestral homes, they developed many debilitating physical symptoms: sweating, dizziness, headaches, fainting, insomnia, appetite loss, tremulousness, and they couldn't stand this for very long. So they left in droves. Talk about an attrition problem! What an understatement.

It occurred to me that if I had travelled to Arctic College I would have observed the trees through my American acculturated eyes. And the trees would not have made me sick as it had the Inuit people. I would not have been able to see the trees the way the students did; and hence as an educator trying to help first-year students, I would not have been able to see the forest for the trees.

I have come to understand years later that the Canadian government has rethought its approaches to bringing higher education to the people of the Arctic region and now operates much more in the mode of bringing classes to where people are instead of forcing an unnatural migration. So what I learned from this exchange was that to help students, educators have to be able to see the forest *and* the trees through the students' eyes, not just theirs.

Avoiding the Faculty is Not the Way to Go

7-18-13

In my work I get the privilege and the opportunity to visit many campuses and this includes the opportunity to hear all kinds of perspectives on the challenges we face to increase student success—all a part of the so-called “completion agenda.”

There is no doubt that the pressure to increase college completion rates is firmly implanted in the thinking and planning of many senior leaders in all but the elite sector where those rates are already very, very high. There is also no doubt in my mind that the awareness of this focus on the completion agenda only goes so far down the chain. Certainly it reaches many staff—both academic and student affairs administrators—both mid and junior level. I also know that it has not reached the consciousness level of many of my colleagues on the faculty. There are many reasons for this, one of them being that their academic leadership chain has not brought this agenda forcefully enough to their attention.

But I think another reason that the faculty is not fully aboard is because keeping them out of the loop has been intentional. There are all kinds of reasons for this.

One of them is the pejorative views of the faculty. In my travels I often hear faculty bashing. Usually this is from colleagues in Student Affairs who feel that their sincere efforts to collaborate with faculty have been rebuffed. I hear them argue that faculty don't really understand or care for students, which when I hear this I write off as absolute nonsense. But it has become part of the socialization process for new members of the student affairs profession, at worst, the notion that the faculty is the enemy.

And academic administrators have their own problems with the faculty. I have seen for many years that when the academic administrators decide to get really focused on the problem of increasing retention they are often inclined to avoid including the faculty in the effort. Why would we want to avoid the type of professional educator who has the most contact with students, particularly in the archetypal institution these days, one with no residence halls, all commuting students, and many non-traditional students who are not going to get involved in “student activities” with professional staff?

Some possible explanations: we avoid the faculty because some of them still have tenure. And they can't be ordered around. And they ask tough questions. Long live academic freedom and critical thinking. And they are sometimes suspicious of the best laid plans of administrators. And working with them is not expeditious. They don't get right on it. They don't have that same sense of urgency. And, above all other concerns: they can vote no confidence. And there is nothing many academic administrators fear more than offending the faculty. After all, if you want to go up the ladder in your career track, and you have a history of offending “the faculty” this is not a way to get good references when you want to leave one institution and move up in another. So there are lots of unfortunate reasons why the faculty have all too often been left out in the cold on retention initiatives.

I have the opportunity at professional meetings where there are “vendors” who are selling free enterprise solutions to senior campus administrators, to observe the pitches from our partners in corporate America. And I am struck with how many of these pitches are not only not directed to the faculty, but intentionally directed to other types of educators who will be on the front lines of the retention wars and who will be influencing the decisions to spend vast sums of institutional treasure on retention solutions.

And I keep asking myself how are we really going to improve academic success of students without a much more intentional engagement of the faculty? I want someone to explain to me how this is ever going to work. I understand why campus resource allocators are avoiding engaging the faculty. And I see that the success rates are pretty much stuck on flat. But what is it going to take for us to really engage the faculty?

I can't answer that for the academy. But I can answer it for my own work. That will be my emphasis—a focus on what faculty do, and that, yes, in collaboration with academic and student affairs administrators. When I last looked it was still the faculty providing the instruction for which we award academic, degree applicable credit. And there are still more faculty than any other type of higher education professional. Maybe we ought to rethink this unfortunate exclusion. I think it is a form of discrimination. And like all forms of discrimination, it is invidious, and harmful to society.

“Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me 35 Years Ago”

7-24-13

The title of this posting, of course, is a statement that President Obama made in his recent news conference on July 19, 2013. When the history of his presidency is written, this may well turn out to be one of the most memorable, most important things, he said to us as our President.

Although the President's comments are being used against him by some, they have been reassuring and moving to millions of others. It is not often we hear leaders of extraordinary prominence, power, wealth, knowledge, wisdom, and educational attainment, express such empathy for those who are far less fortunate, accomplished, polished, erudite, articulate and self actualized. And we have never had a President before who could express such empathy as an African American especially for African American citizens, and by extension all other citizens who may have been victims of prejudice, discrimination and hate crimes.

Of course, I cannot say, that I could have been, literally, Trayvon Martin at any time in my former life—for I have always been a white man of privilege. But, in a broader sense I can and I have said “That could have been me XX years ago ” And this was one of the President's more fundamental messages to me. As a person of power, privilege, and influence, I have a responsibility to express empathy for my less fortunate fellow citizens and then act accordingly based on that empathy.

I refer to my interactions with thousands of my former students and those of fellow higher educators, students who often do not start well in college; are at risk; who make unwise choices; who fall through the cracks; who are badly advised; badly taught; unprepared; immature; not yet ready for college; disadvantaged by a culture of poverty; and so forth.

When I saw a student that was homesick—that could have been me that was me.

When I saw a student who had no study skills—that could have been me—that was me.

When I saw a student who was misadvised and taking courses that were not an appropriate fit— that could have been me—that was me.

When I saw a student who had no idea why he/she was in college, other than to please his/her parents that could have been me—that was me.

When I saw a student who instead of getting invested in his/her new life pined away for a romantic interest back home—that could have been me that was me.

When I saw a student who obviously was depressed but not getting any help—that could have been me—that was me.

When I saw a student who was experiencing immediate academic difficulty and underperforming—that could have been me—that was me.

When I saw a student who did not make wise use of the freedom college gave him, and,

for example, overcut his classes—that could have been me—that was me.

There are many experiential bases, as well as intellectual and philosophical, for my eventual career as a spokesperson for low status first-year university and college students. But certainly the most powerful motivator has been that of acting on my empathy for the plight of underperforming beginning college students.

How Would You Feel?

7-25-13

I can't remember when I started doing this. Has to do with whenever I am in a situation where there might be a potential for someone of a particular demographic characteristic, or philosophical point of view, to read something into a remark or statement I made that I had not intended and would not have wanted to be an interpretation. I find myself all too frequently feeling like I need to do this. Questions I ask are: How would this sound to you if you were _____? How would this look to you if you were _____? How would you feel if you were _____? And the "you" is yours truly.

And that's exactly the reaction I have been having to the verdict in the Trayvon Martin murder trial. It has been making me think about how I would feel if I were__.

This has evoked for me memories of a summer "appointment" I had in the year 1969 working in an Upward Bound program. I was both a faculty member and "director of counseling services." Was given the latter job as a function of my recent former service in the Air Force as a psychiatric social worker. This particular Upward Bound program was hosted by what was then Winthrop College, in Rock Hill, S.C., which in my judgment displayed to the students a number of examples of institutionalized racism. As context, this institution was a racially integrated, all female college, except for this federally funded co-ed summer program for high school youngsters. The federal government also came to that same conclusion about institutionalized racism and defunded the program. But that is another whole story. So this was 1969. The year before Martin Luther King had been murdered and there were riotous outbreaks around the country. Also the year before 33 black college students had been shot, all in the back, by the South Carolina Highway Patrol in what came to be known as the Orangeburg Massacre (title of a book by my former USC colleague, Jack Bass). Three of those students died of their wounds, incurred as they protested the continuing segregation of a bowling alley in Orangeburg, S.C. To understate the matter, the context for these black Upward Bound kids on a predominantly white female campus was a tinderbox. And these young people were angry. And frightened. And they were definitely asking themselves how things the white administrators said and did to them looked to them, the kids.

This was the first time I had directly observed and been forced to deal with the anger of young people directed towards the history of injustice from the previous three hundred years. It had a powerful impact on me. I will never forget how angry, hurt, confused, but brave and outspoken those young people were. I really admired them.

So when the trial verdict was announced this weekend I found myself immediately wondering what it would be like for me this fall if I were back teaching on a university campus and finding myself asking "how do we look to....?" especially the first-year, black male students who will be joining my university.

What a year this has been!

States have been adopting legislation to require the use of voter ID's to prevent fraud in spite of their admission that there are no indications of voter fraud at all, leaving an inescapable conclusion that the intent is to prevent certain citizens from being able to vote. As I write this, the state of Pennsylvania has just gone to court to defend its legislation that opponents claim will disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of poor, elderly, and minority residents

The Supreme Court has just struck down the single most important provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, requiring affected states to obtain “pre clearance” approval of changes in election laws and policies. In just the several weeks since this ruling, states have rushed to put forward new legislation that opponents say will dilute the votes of Blacks and Hispanics.

Do We Want Them to Be Like Us?

8-12-13

When I was in college, it never occurred to me to become a college professor. In retrospect, given that I have been a professor for 46 years, this now strikes me as pretty amazing. And while I suspect that many of us higher educators, realizing how different we think our students are from us, assume they don't want to be like us. I just had an annual summer experience watching 400 young students who want to be like their professors!

As I look back on it now, the signs should have been all too apparent to me: I was destined to be an academic. Once I got adjusted in college, and off academic probation (!), I truly loved being in college.

*I loved going to class. In my senior year I even audited two courses, the classes for which met at 8.00AM. And this was on top of an 18 hour load.

*I loved visiting my professors outside of class in their offices and even in their homes (I went to a small, liberal arts college, in a small, rural, Ohio town).

*I loved talking to other bright, intellectually stimulated and stimulating fellow students.

*I loved having my mind, and personality opened up to new ways of thinking.

*I loved becoming intellectually independent, especially of my parents. That meant especially that I became a member of a different political party than was their preference.

*And I was a very good student.

But, none of my professors ever said to me: "John, have you ever considered becoming a college professor?"

None of them ever said to me: "You know, John, this is a really good life. You ought to consider it."

All I knew was that my parents had given me a four-year free ride. I didn't have to contribute anything financially to my own college education. I was a child of privilege, unlike the majority of today's college students. But I knew that my welfare state was going to come to an abrupt end when college did. That was the deal my parents had made with me. And I knew they meant it.

So senior year rolled around and the Vietnam War had rolled around too, and the draft. So I really couldn't put off deciding what I was going to do post graduation. Unless I wanted to go to Vietnam, I had four choices that would grant me a deferment from the draft:

1. Marriage. I had several candidates but realized I was not mature enough and that it would be unethical, to join a number of my male classmates who were deciding to get married to get a draft deferment.
2. Work for a defense contractor. I didn't want to do that. I was opposed to supporting the war machine.
3. Attending seminary and joining the ministry. For intellectual and values based reasons I could not do this.
4. Graduate school. Yes, I could do that. And did. That's another whole story. And in the midst of that I did get drafted anyway; volunteered for Air Force officer training; was sent to South Carolina; where I started teaching part-time for the University of South Carolina; and the rest is my history.

As a practicing academic, I resolved to do better than my professorial mentors in recruiting my successors. So I have encouraged a number of my really, really good students to consider joining the academy. And some of them have I am thankful to say. But like so many of my colleagues, I would and do assume that most college students don't end up wanting to emulate professors like me.

But every summer I have the opportunity and the joy of watching students, most of them who do want to become like their professors. This gives me the incentive to think about how this phenomenon could be replicated.

My wife and I live in a small North Carolina town, to which we were drawn to move from South Carolina in 1999.

What attracted us especially, in addition to the beauty of the western North Carolina Blue Ridge mountains surrounding small college town, with a mild climate, and proximity to a regional airport and really “hot” city, Asheville, was the presence in Brevard, of a nationally renowned, now 77 year old, private classical music training institute, the Brevard Music Center (BMC). Betsy and I had started attending concerts there on mountain air cooled summer nights in the mid 90’s and finally decided to buy a “view lot” and to dream about building a dream home. And that’s exactly what we did.

Each summer BMC hosts about 420 gifted young musicians, ranging in age from about 13 to 30. This means they have a high school age cohort and a college and graduate school aged cohort. The faculty is composed of 65 resident faculty, drawn from the finest college and university music faculties and orchestras in the country (and beyond). BMC has a 180 acre campus, on which all the students and faculty live together for about 8 weeks. And there are 7 weeks of concerts, daily, with featured ticketed events on Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. My wife and I attend every one of these. The experience is relaxing, peaceful, enjoyable, meditative, reflective, entertaining, and inspiring. I say “inspiring” because that is the effect the students have on me.

BMC has three orchestras: one for the high school age students; one for the college students; and one for a composite of faculty and the most able students.

When I drive or walk around the campus, and/or attend concerts.....

*I see the students practicing constantly—alone, with a faculty member, in ensembles with other students, and in full orchestral rehearsal. All hours of the day and night. While they do have fun at BMC, that’s not why they came.

*I see students who are very, very purposeful. They are very, very focused. They know precisely why they are there and how this fits in with the trajectory they think they want for their lives.

*I see students who are very self-disciplined, mentally and behaviorally.

*I see students who are doing their version of “academic” work, many hours each day during a time of year that for most students is a form of vacation.

*I see a stage full of college students all dressed in the traditional, professional, classical musician garb that has been the custom for several centuries. They are not allowed to individuate through dress, as they are on the academic year campuses.

*They have all agreed to comply with some minimum standards of decorum with respect to other aspects of appearance.

*They sit and wait with anticipation until a fellow student, the concertmaster, in effect, calls them to order.

*Then the conductor appears and all their eyes are riveted upon her/him. In this case, the conductor is the professor. And they do exactly as the conductors directs, immediately, and for precisely as long as the conductor conducts. I am not used to seeing college students so respectful of authority and in total compliance with that authority.

*I see students being publicly affirmed for the results of their competence, dedication, focus, and performance. They are applauded and cheered for their academic productivity. How often does that happen in the more usual rituals of being a college student.

*I see family members coming to observe, support and commend their child’s performance of academic work.

*In the highest level of the three orchestras, the one where faculty and students all perform together, I see college students and professors doing academic work together. I see the students sitting right next to their professors, looking at them for approval and other forms of feedback. The students and professors have assumed a common identity and the students are more hooked than ever on their chosen vocation—a way of life indeed.

So I find myself asking, what elements of a summer, residential, classical arts training institute could be replicated in the conventional college or university.

What would we professors have to do, have to be, for our students to want to emulate us?

How could we have more opportunities for one on one "studio" teaching?

How could we be more affirming publicly of the demonstrated competencies of our students?

How could we better engage families in coming to observe demonstrated competencies of their college students?

How could we increase the amount of time students actually spend "practicing" for whatever it is that we are trying to teach them?

How could we increase the amount of time students spent in peer groups rehearsing the presentation of the competencies we are trying to teach them?

Surely this level of motivation, dedication, passion, esprit d'corps on the part of our students does not have to be unique to the arts.....

My observations may also remind some readers to some of the experiences students have in intercollegiate athletics. I am not going to go there in this posting, but the thought has occurred to me many times.

I am so fortunate to live a life where I can be inspired by college students.

This is the Best Time of Year

8-19-13

This is the best time of year to gin up your empathy quotient and recall your own beginning college experience. I am suggesting this because of the natural coincidence with the annual rite of passage that is soon upon us of first-year college students arriving at our institutions. If you have any direct contact with these students, or supervise people who do, I think this is an ideal time to use your capacity for empathy to insure that these new students are getting the best treatment possible.

When I started my own career as a college student, or 6 years later as a beginning academic, first-year students were not the objects of institutional focus they are today. We have come a long way. And, as the creator of the so-called “first-year experience” concept in higher education, I have played a role in that improved treatment. My own empathy for the needs of entering college students was definitely shaped by my own experiences beginning college. I am aware of those experiences at all times of the year. They are a major part of who I am, because they were all about who I was, and thankfully was able to overcome and to become.

My father drove me 600 miles from my home in Connecticut to my new home at Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio. He didn’t drop me off immediately and actually stayed a day and a half or so and two nights. I can remember him driving off and my waving him goodbye. I was not a happy camper and would have liked to have been in the car with him. Anticipatory homesickness (that’s a new concept and phrase which I have just coined) had become actual homesickness.

My father had wanted me to go to another college, his alma mater, Dartmouth; and he had told me that if Dartmouth didn’t work out, that Williams College would be an acceptable substitute. So, as a counter-dependent adolescent I didn’t apply to either! I was lucky he would even send me to college at all. But he really couldn’t conceive of any alternative for me. I could and had.

Landscape gardening had been my calling. As a teenager I had six other teenage boys working for me on a landscaping, yard-work, crew. I was the entrepreneur who went out and got the jobs, schmoozed the customers, and supervised my friends, while working with them too. And I thought I would like to do this for the rest of my life. It was very gratifying and enjoyable work. I could see the fruits of my labor at the end of each day. I could work outdoors in the beautiful New England upper class suburbs outside New York City. The money was amazingly good for a 17 year old high school kid. And I would have been able to stay home with the girl with whom I was “going steady.”

But my father crafted a skillful intervention, a deal I couldn’t refuse. The older I get, the smarter he gets. The deal was I go to college, any college, for a year and “try college.” If I didn’t like it, fine, I could quit. But if I tried it then he would get off my back and we would both move on. He was, of course, hoping that college experience would “take” and I would not quit.

So if I went, bound and determined to make this a one-year tour. My father asked me to do two things for him: 1) join a fraternity (like he had and thought was one of the best things he ever did); and 2) go out for the crew team. He had been a very successful varsity athlete, lettering in 3 sports—football, basketball and track—and setting a New Jersey record for the 440. This was a heavy legacy. I had never participated in any sports. Had disdain for them in fact. He thought crew would be the perfect fit because it

was outdoors, non body contact, and my serious nearsightedness would not be a hindrance.

So I gave him 50% of what he asked for. I went out for the crew team and made a junior varsity team. Crew became one of the most powerful experiences I had in college. But that's another story.

Seeing with Different Eyes This Year

8-28-13

Every year for the past twelve years my wife and I have taken a vacation starting on Labor Day and spanning the next several weeks, focused on the New England region. Each year we note some obvious and not so obvious differences between these “blue” states and the “red” state we live in, North Carolina. But this is a different year.

A difference of less import to us is anticipating the change from one climate zone to another. Usually, it is a matter of going from a somewhat warmer and more humid climate to a cooler and dryer one. Not this summer. The climate in western North Carolina where we reside is quite moderate, and so it's not like it used to be for us when we would leave the torrid climate of summer South Carolina and head north. But this summer has been the wettest and coolest on record. I feel like I have been in England all summer. I would have enjoyed that far more. This is not England. The elements have cheated me of my summer.

And my description above of the “climate” of North Carolina as being “quite moderate” would have been how I would have described the public policy climate of North Carolina from 1999 when I arrived until January of 2013 when for the first time in a hundred years the Republican party assumed control of both houses of the legislature and the governorship. As a headline in [The New York Times](#), August 11, page 1, above the fold, recently put it, North Carolina has lost its “middle way.” And now I don't know what to do.

In the first seven months of the year, the North Carolina legislature:

- introduced, but withdrew, a bill to establish an official state religion
- repealed the previous “racial justice act” which pertained to safeguards to protect against racial bias in sentencing for capital offenses
- cut employment benefits by approximately a third, both maximum amounts and length of eligibility
- reduced women's access to abortions to one clinic in a state of 9.5 million residents that will meet the new regulations for being a licensed provider. That clinic is in nearby Asheville, and was recently raided and shut down by state authorities
- expanded the locations where citizens may carry concealed weapons to include now bars and college campuses
- decided not to participate in the expansion of Medicaid, thus denying about 500,000 of our neediest citizens government provided health care
- abolished all inheritance taxes
- enacted major income tax reductions for the highest earners (like myself) and increased tax rates for the less advantaged
- reduced corporate income taxes
- relaxed a wide array of environmental regulations
- moved to permit “fracking”
- enacted legislature to punish one municipality for its reputation of being “the cesspool of sin”, Asheville, so named by a recently deceased former legislator. Many in the city now wear that label as a badge of honor on T-shirts sporting that descriptor. This punishment has taken the form of the state taking over the city's water authority without providing any compensation, and also moving to wrest control of the local airport authority from local county control to state control (same action underway in Charlotte/Mecklenburg with a much, much larger airport)

- moved to permit the expansion of charter schools and the award of “vouchers” which opponents fear is an effort to gut the public schools whose teachers are a member of a professional association whose members primarily vote Democratic
- slashed funds for teacher aids in elementary schools
- enacted further draconian cuts in state aid to public education leaving now local counties to fend for themselves in their responses
- significantly cut both the University of North Carolina System budget and that of the North Carolina Community College System. In contrast, the New England state legislatures have increased public funding for higher education from moderate levels to a high of over 16% in Massachusetts. I probably won't live to see that in NC.
- and perhaps most controversially, enacted some fifty pages of new voting regulations the net effect which may result in the suppression of approximately 300,000 voters access to voting privileges with special attention to reducing voting by college students (who normally are more inclined to vote Democratic) in the locales where they are enrolled as students.

And the above is only a partial listing. I am in shock.

So this year's vacation will be different for us. We will be looking at these blue states through different eyes. Is it time for me to give up my 46 year effort to improve higher education in the south as symbolized by my commitment to that by living in the region?

We do enjoy western Massachusetts where we vacation every year in the Lenox, Stockbridge area. This year we will spend four days there, attending a jazz concert and four plays. The region is very similar in appearance to the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina where we now live. But the winters are much less severe in NC! And I have a brother in Massachusetts and a sister in Connecticut. And our publisher is based in Boston where we visit several times a year. And the politics of Massachusetts are much more compatible with ours in terms of the substance of public policy legislation.

And we love Vermont where we will spend a week in the Burlington area, which also has some similarities to Asheville, North Carolina—both liberal, popular tourist destinations, with a focus on artistic and outdoor pursuits combined with a zealous pursuit of environmental activism. And we love the fact that there are no billboards in Vermont. We plan to hike, dine well, and see four plays. But could we live there? Ah, yes, we need to think about what those winters would be like. We only vacation there in the summer and we are not skiers. But then I had a great life in South Carolina where the climate in the summer I found equally inhospitable.

And then we will go north in Quebec for a few days. We love Canada. We have a marital pact to vacation in that country every year. We feel so safe in that country which has strict gun controls, unlike our country. We find the Canadian people so friendly, civil, polite, willing to engage in rational discourse, and without the screaming political heads. We like visiting a country that has universal health care and many forms of public policy that insure lower levels of infant mortality, childhood poverty, and hunger, than our wealthy country. But would we want to live there? I did live there for five years in the 50's, obviously when I was a child. And I loved Canada, and am thankful to this day for the fine public and private education I received there.

And we love Maine although we are not visiting there this vacation. We so appreciate how the natives interact with those of us “from away.” We have found such beauty in its diverse geography. And we respect so many of our friends there making a difference in higher education.

So what's an old liberal war horse like me to do? What have we done so far?

We have increased our political giving and we have to do much more of that. And we attended a protest rally in Asheville with 6000-10,000 of our closest friends—a rally dubbed “Moral Monday.” We were amazed at the coalition of activist groups. And the wide range of demographic groups present—lots of elderly, retired, younger adults with their children, traditional aged college students, the straight, gay, undocumented and documented immigrants, clergy, and many more forms of professional classes. We were in very good company. But we have to do more.

Even though we will be looking at the New England blue states through a different lens, it will still be a vacation. Part of me wishes I could take a vacation and not think about what is most on my mind, most of the time outside my professional work and thinking, and that is the level of public and political discourse in our country and the resulting public policy. I can only hope that some of the students my work helps keep in college will help us achieve at least a return to the middle way.

I Had Never Heard Anything Like This

8-28-13

This week I will be joining millions of my fellow Americans in recalling and inwardly celebrating the significant milestone that Martin Luther King's speech to the March on Washington represented in late August of 1963. I was a very impressionable 19 years old and was about to start my junior year in college. I had a summer job in Hillside New Jersey, in a very racially integrated factory, making beer and soda cans, but not a drop to drink—a real torture for a college kid. I was driving on the Garden State Parkway to my shift and listening to the opening of the speech. Not more than a paragraph into it, I knew that I had never heard anything like this before. Not being a multi-tasker like my students today, I had to pull off the Parkway and do nothing but listen to the speech. It still rings in my ears.

As context, I would want my readers to know that two years before I had taken my college's only required course: Speech 101. And my grade in the course was a D. But I had learned enough to know a very special speech when I heard it.

Because I had had a political science professor in my first year of college that got me to become a daily reader of The New York Times, (believe it or not I surreptitiously took The Times into the plant every day to read on my two breaks—I never saw any other steelworker reading that paper—instead they all read The New York Daily News, which carried the daily "scratch sheet" so the workers could place their bets on the horses!), I was able to read for myself the next day the complete text of the speech. It was some of the most moving and evocative prose I had ever read.

As I read the speech I could hear Dr. King's voice. I can still hear his voice. I can still see his words. I still read his words now and then. The metaphoric images they conjured up for me will always be with me. This speech, this courageous leader, helped show me the way to try to make a difference for others in my own life. His words gave me a vision for a better America--- a vision I still have in spite of the Supreme Court's recent gutting of the Voting Rights Act, enacted two years after Dr. King's speech in 1963, and not coincidentally.

I was different that fall when I returned to college. I was more serious. I was more compassionate. I was more liberal. I was more reflective. I had a vision for my country that I had not had before. This was one of the many turning points for me during my college years.

Three months later, almost to the day, another man, whose skin was a different hue, who also moved and inspired me, was murdered. I have kept him alive in my head and values too.

And just under five years later, in April of 1968 I found myself out of college and graduate school and on active duty in the military. I was also an adjunct professor at a regional campus of the University of South Carolina, USC Lancaster, an occupation in which I had found my calling. Like Dr. King I was an opponent of the Vietnam War even though I was serving my country in the Air Force. And I was very open with my students about my views, which they found quite controversial. Dr. King was murdered on a Thursday and I was scheduled to teach my class the next day on Friday evening. So I went to the Base library and checked out four different volumes of Dr. King's writings. My class that evening was a celebration of his life. I gave a reading from these works and engaged my students, those few that were willing, in discussion about what his life had meant and might mean as time and perspectives moved on.

A week later when I arrived on the campus and checked my mailbox before my class I found a note in it from my Dean, asking me to come to his office. I always arrived for class about an hour early so that I could meet with any of my students who knew I would be there early. My Dean knew I would be there early too. He and I had a good relationship. He had even offered me a full-time teaching position at the institution to commence after my tour of active duty was to end in the fall of 1968. And I had accepted the appointment and looked forward to moving there.

So I went in and found my Dean. He explained in a very straight forward manner that after my class of the previous Friday night, a small delegation of my students (he never told me how many or whom) had come to see him to complain that I was a "n----- lover", as illustrated by the fact that I had devoted an entire three hour class period to the life and times of the late Martin Luther King. I acknowledged that I was guilty as charged. And while the Dean was at it, he explained to me that my views on the Vietnam War had also been reported to him and that

such views were contrary to local community sentiment, which were very pro-war. He even offered me this fascinating explanation: that because of the history of discrimination against black South Carolinians and the resulting inferior public education they had received, a result had been significantly higher failure rates for black males on the Selective Service AFQT, Armed Forces Qualifying Test. In turn, that meant that whites, who had been more educationally advantaged were passing the test at higher rates; and thus being drafted at higher rates; and thus being killed in Vietnam at higher rates; and thus there was great community support for the war to rationalize and justify this loss of local citizens. This was a transformative conversation for me. I knew I would never fit at this campus under this leader and so I resigned my appointment even before finding another one (which I did—and from which I was terminated a year later for my civil rights activism on behalf of local black citizens—another story indeed, and further testimony of the influence of Dr. King).

And two months later, in June of 1968, another potentially great American leader was murdered, Robert Kennedy. I still feel cheated by that.

I invite any of my readers, who have the opportunity to have college students in class, to also hold a reading of Dr. King's works. I urge you to engage your students in reflection upon the current status of equality of opportunity in America. I urge you to invite your students to share with you who are their s/heroes. Do they hear the voices of any leaders ringing in their heads and shaping their values, convictions, and actions? Do they go to the primary source (now on the web of course) and read the words of leaders themselves, as I did to implant those words and images more deeply in my consciousness? How might the college experience and period of life be opening them up to new sources of inspiration and to the kinds of people they could and will become? You, my reader, can be instrumental in facilitating these kinds of epiphanies and resulting transformations for our students.

I knew then in 1963 and I know even more now, fifty years later, that the March on Washington and Dr. King's speech was an agent of liberation and transformation for me.

What Can I Do? What Can YOU Do?

9-4-13

The most immediate thing I have on my mind as I start to write this posting, other than the topic I have decided to write upon, is the quoted words of the man who wants to be known now as “The Boss”, Chris Christie, the Governor of New Jersey and a probable candidate for the 2016 presidential race. He was quoted in Maureen Dowd’s column in The New York Times on August 28 as saying about people like your writer here:

“I think that we have some folks that believe our job is to be college professors. Now college professors are fine, I guess. You know, college professors basically spout out ideas that nobody ever does anything about...”

I have a different view. I believe that college professors have great influence and I say this not only because I am so acutely aware of the influence my professors at Marietta College and Purdue University had on me. So I am going to continue to write even though the Governor thinks I am wasting my words on you my readers.

I am continuing to think about the 50th anniversary celebration of the march on Washington of 1963 and the lasting impact of Dr. King’s words at that occasion.

My thinking here is about the basic questions:

1. What can I do?
2. What can YOU do?

Those questions pertain to you and me if we believe (and I do):

- that there is continuing injustice in our country today based on the combination of public policy and individual actions directed towards people of races, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other variables that differ from the majority—and especially that differ from the archetypal group most vehemently resisting change in America: southern, adult, aging, white, males
- that there is demonstrable evidence of significant inequality in our country in spite of public policy actions to address the lack of that—such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- that the progress gaps as a function of race and ethnicity when applied to such societal indicators as life span, poverty, infant mortality, hunger, educational attainment levels, per capita and family income, are not acceptable.
- that there remains a legacy of de jure unequal treatment and that those of us who have been historically privileged have some unmet obligation to help rectify this
- that some people are still inherently disadvantaged through circumstances of their own which they do not control, especially race and ethnicity (in other words, it is not their fault!)
- that the Civil Rights movement is an unfinished process
- that there is demonstrable recent evidence of intentional public policy actions and legal decisions to reverse the course of the Civil Rights movement—such as actions taken by the legislatures of North and South Carolina and Texas to suppress voter registration and voting

So what can you do?

I am going to make some suggestions by reflecting on what I am thinking I can do. That is what I have been asking myself even more than usual since the commemoration activities of Wednesday, August 28, 2013.

What can I do?

I can and I will

- Join others of like mind and spirit in public gathering to peacefully express our support for public policy actions to promote opportunity
- Contribute money to associations, churches, and political action groups that support and assist those whose expanded opportunities I want to champion
- Contribute money to elected officials and candidates for elected offices who support the advancement of social justice.
- Contribute money to individuals and organizations that are using the courts to challenge current public policy actions to suppress voter participation
- Write elected officials and other leaders to offer my support and encouragement for stances they take to support these causes
- Be vigilant to continually examine my own thinking, sense of fairness and open mindedness
- Be reflective about the ways in which I learned prejudice and on guard for any unconscious bias which I may practice in my thinking and actions
- Make special efforts with my and my wife's grandchildren to help instill in them a sense of values that would make them supportive of social justice
- Use the many opportunities I have for public speaking to encourage my fellow citizens and educators to be more intentional and assertive about expanding opportunities for those less advantaged
- Practice intentional, invitational, support for affirmative action in my own opportunities to influence hiring decisions
- Use my social interactions with friends and colleagues to appropriately champion these efforts and help them think through how they can do the same.

Is this an exhaustive list? Certainly not. I know other ideas will come to me. The main thing is that this must and will remain a high priority for my conscious reflection, thinking and action. This overall objective is who I am.

What can YOU do?

- Come up with your own statement of "I can and I will..." as I did above.
- Perhaps use my statement as a check-list to start the development of your own.
- Share yours with others as I have mine with you.
- You can be intentional. You can move from best intentions to action.
- You have a personal and professional sphere of influence where you control certain elements of your life situation in ways you could support others in their journeys to attain equal opportunity in our country.
- You surely will think and act in ways that I haven't.
- You have many opportunities that I don't. And I have some you don't.

But we all can do something. One person—you---me, can make a difference.

That is what the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington reminds me of, and further strengthens my resolve.

What Kind of Help Do You Need?

8-23-13

This is an attempt at a reflective piece on just exactly what is it that educators in the “student success” field want from largely for-profit vendors to help them, the educators, to help the students to be more successful. I offer this, in part, because even though I have played a significant role in this development of the academy’s growing dependence on the private enterprise sector in our field, I am still amazed by this dependence, and ambivalent too.

First, a return to the way it used to be. When I hosted the first conference on “the freshman year experience” in 1982 it never occurred to me to invite companies to come exhibit at this meeting. But not too long into the decade I witnessed the discovery by the textbook publishing industry of the first-year seminar, and that sector of the free enterprise system quickly became focused on student success work. During the same time my friends Lee Noel and Randy Levitz, formerly of American College Testing, launched their consulting firm to assist campuses wishing to enhance student retention. This coincided with the decline of traditional aged students in the birth rate pipeline and the increasing institutional competition for students that resulted. But to fast forward to what is now the annual conference on the First-Year Experience; there are enough commercial exhibitors to fill a hotel ballroom. And the word most frequently displayed on the back panels of their booths is “retention.”

What are student success educators turning to corporate vendors for—the holy grail of “retention.”

Why do we need help from external parties? What is it that we need to improve student retention that we can’t do or provide ourselves?

Although the non-profit organization I lead is a key player in the industry of providing help to institutions struggling with the retention challenge there is a part of me that is still incredulous that we higher educators can’t figure this out and do it on our own. I suppose this perspective is influenced by my own formative years as a young professor working with at-risk, first generation, South Carolina, college students. There were no vendors for me to turn to. What I thought and found those students needed the most, I personally, individually and directly, could and did provide:

- attention, encouragement, and praise
- prompt feedback on tests and papers
- an early warning system...me! I observed and intervened immediately
- out of class assistance
- optional study groups (my own version of SI, Supplemental Instruction!)
- alternative modalities of delivering instruction (I put two of my history courses on self-paced videotapes and made two courses available by “correspondence”, a precursor to on-line learning)
- experiential learning—especially in field trips
- out-of-class interaction between faculty and staff (including optional class dinners in my home)
- developmental academic advising (the only kind of academic advising I knew how to provide)
- rewarding students for participating in co-curricular activities
- emphasizing relevance (my former students still remember me for making them read [The New York Times](#))
- an educationally and retention generating first-year seminar (I directed and taught in University 101 for 25 years)

I did find though that there was one thing my students needed that I couldn’t provide, and for which I turned to the for-profit sector: a first-year seminar textbook. When we developed University 101 in 1972 there was no textbook published by a textbook company for this course genre. So in 1981 a colleague of mine, Professor Jerry Jewler and I decided to write one. We did and that book was published, and in short order became widely emulated by other publishers. This introduced shameless commerce to the first-year experience movement. I still maintain that students in this particular course need a “text” and I am glad the publishing industry responded to provide such.

As I look back on the period of my life when I was in the trenches doing student success work directly with first-year students, what strikes me as very different from the work as I see it now was the fact that I was a faculty member. In the present time we faculty are underrepresented in this so-called student success work. The reasons for this are complex: many of us are in this work but don’t think of ourselves in that manner; many of us have not

been invited (by institutional leaders) to participate in this work; many of us have not been properly “developed” through faculty development to use our talents for this purpose; and because many administrators have deliberately turned to fellow academic and student affairs administrators to engage in this work instead. And they are very different than I was, and unlike me, they do need outside support. The majority of them are not teachers, do not reach students in and through the classroom, and thus don’t have the opportunity to engage in all the practices that I could use naturally as a classroom faculty member.

So what are these student success educators looking for from outside vendors?

- providing remedial/developmental instruction/courses—this is a form of outsourcing
- direct tutoring of students—done both on-line and by phone (Why can’t we do this ourselves? Is this just a matter of cost?)
- mentoring and coaching of students—provided on line and by phone
- consulting/advisory services to produce recommendations which if acted on may improve retention
- developing comprehensive institution-wide plans to improve new student performance and hence retention (this is the work I am in)
- tracking students via software, in terms of academic performance to permit various forms of institutional intervention
- predicting student behaviors—by means of what has become known as “predictive analytics”
- early warning/alert systems
- project management software to guide institutions in the execution of improvement plans (I am also in this business!)
- textbooks (e.g. for first-year seminars)
- course management systems
- “training” for faculty/staff, advisors in instructional pedagogies, advising, career planning, first-year seminar instruction, customer service
- surveys to provide us information on what students actually do before college or did or didn’t do before college
- information and inspiration

And this is only a very partial and incomplete list.

No doubt the academy now has a much greater knowledge of what to do to improve student retention than when I started teaching University 101. And we have far more tools and resources at our command. And we have a formidable array of corporate partners who will be happy to sell us “solutions” to the problem of retention. Yes, much has changed. We now should be much better able to retain students.

But retention is basically flat. I would argue that if we hadn’t been undertaking these many interventions the picture would be far worse.

The conditions though that are most needed to improve student retention are basically those I needed when I started my work without all these student success tools, and these conditions cannot be purchased from external corporate vendors:

- an institutional value system that values first-year students, their success and retention
- the institutional will to engage in retention related practices
- the allocation of sufficient resources: personnel, physical, time, rewards systems, and fiscal
- a faculty rewards system that incentivizes the kinds of practices I engaged in with my students
- the offering of established best practices in student success work
- sufficient engagement of the faculty in student success work
- taking institutional and individual responsibility for student learning
- an optimistic and liberal view that it is the proper role of government funded entities to provide these opportunities for those less fortunate

I understand why the for-profit sector has become our partner: they have seen a vacuum and they have rushed in and filled it. They have seen a need that we haven’t been successfully addressing on our own. They have seen that we are struggling and that many of our institutions aren’t doing very well on the retention front. Vendors understand we are under pressure from policy makers and funders. Vendors understand demographics: our

country has a shrinking middle class and is producing more and more poor people who will need more and more help. So if I were a corporate vendor, I would be bullish on this market. It is a growth industry.

- Are we at the point of overreliance on non educators for their tools and services?
Time will tell. What would it take to make more of us higher educators more capable on our own to foster increased student retention. The mantra on my staff is "if John can do it, anyone can do it!" I did it. More of my readers can. I hope they will.

Your Friends, They Come and They Go ...

9-10-13

I am writing this piece while I am with my wife out of the country, in Canada, on vacation. It is a relief to pick up a newspaper and see US news relegated to inside pages. Things aren't going too well for my government these days and I am glad to see the world has other more positive things to think about. Today is the day President Obama delivers an address to the nation to implore us to support his proposed directions for dealing with the terrible situation in Syria.

As I think about my President I am reminded what my first mentor, my first University President told me once. He wasn't trying to persuade our university to militarily attack another sovereign nation, as is Mr. Obama. But he was reflecting on the situations where Presidents are faced with opponents popping up all around them.

Poor President Obama. He can't win on this one. The American people are sick of foreign adventures. They are punishing this President for the sins of the previous one. Now they don't trust any president when he cites intelligence efforts. And there is the far left leaning wing of the President's own party. He knew they would oppose this. And he knew that some of the loyal opposition would oppose him no matter what course of action he proposed simply because he proposed it. So the Syrian question has created a new coalition of strange bedfellows, exactly the situation my first university president summed up to me as:

"Your friends, they come and they go, but your enemies just accumulate!"

And this is exactly what has happened to President Obama and the Syrian mess.

When I first heard this phrase, it was in 1980 during a visit my Dean and I were paying a former President of the University of South Carolina, Thomas F. Jones. Jones had been President from 1962-1974 and had "resigned" when he lost a vote of confidence in the Board of Trustees over the controversy of the day, the establishment of a medical school. Actually, he won the battle but lost the war. He got the medical school but the vote cost him so many former friends that he ultimately could not retain enough support on this board to retain his job. He told us this story as he was dying of cancer.

Jones was my first mentor. He was the President who changed my life by appointing me as Director of University 101.

We had flown up from Columbia, S.C to Cambridge to see him in his office as Vice President for Research at MIT, to bid him farewell. It was in that three- hour conversation that he made me take a death bed oath never to give up the work on the "freshman year experience". And I haven't.

I am thankful that most of my professional and personal lives (I feel as if I have led two lives at least) have been about the accumulation of friends. I would be hard put to think about the accumulation of enemies.

When I was nine, my father moved our family to Canada from the US where he was to run an American company in Canada for the next five years. Not long after I started in a Canadian public school my father sat me down and asked me how I was coming in making friends. Instead of showing him that I produced a little black book, literally, that I kept and in which I had a page or section that I devoted to the listing of "enemies." When

I showed my father this he was disturbed and immediately redirected me to think about the importance of accumulating "friends." And I don't mean the kind of Facebook "friends." I am not "on" Facebook. This conversation took place in 1953.

The Need to Be Reminded of What You Already Know

9-23-13

I have been working on the challenges of enhancing student retention for 46 years. And I live with a woman who has been working on the same issue for 25 years. Without meaning to sound, let alone be, cynical, I will confess that we often wonder if there are or can be any new ideas out there—ideas to improve student retention. What I have concluded matters more is what we already know and what we are—or are not—doing with what we already know.

I meet many higher educators who already know what they and their institutions need to know about improving student retention. But they continue to look for new ideas, new approaches, as if they are insatiable and searching for the retention holy grail. If they would stop and reflect, I think they already know what they and their institutions need to be doing. The more important question is why aren't they doing more intentionally and comprehensively what they know they need to be doing.

One reason may be because they aren't being reminded enough. Or they may have forgotten. Or they may be distracted by all the new bells and whistles being pitched largely by the free enterprise system to higher educators charged with improving retention. I have to admit too to a fascination with some of these new approaches—for example, the use of predictive analytics, dashboards, and early warning intervention systems to predict, monitor, communicate and intervene with students.

I have long believed that you can't hear often enough the most important things in life, these things we really do need to say to each other. We all need our mantras: institutions and individuals. We need to be reminded.

I had a conversation today with an 18 year old college student who is also a relative, who reminded me of what I already knew but needed to hear again.

She started college at a regional, public university as first-year student two days after Labor Day. She is a full-time, non-residential student, taking 15 hours; has an off-campus job working well over 20 hours a week. She is a second generation college student. Her father is a college graduate. Her mother a high school graduate. She is one of three children, the only female, and the only one to go to college. She aspires to be an elementary school teacher. She has no course in which class size is larger than 25 (what a bargain considering her first choice school was a residential private college which proved to be unaffordable for her and her family).

Now if I could have written a more ideal script for her knowing what I know about what predicts for degree attainment, I would have wanted her to be:

- residing on campus
- working less than 20 hours a week
- and working on campus as opposed to off
- attending a first choice institution
- attending a college with higher retention and graduation rates

Based on the conversation I had with her about what is working for her at her new public university home, this is what I noted, was reminded of, and concluded:

- Even though she was a very successful high school student academically, she acknowledged she was very anxious upon starting at university, fearing that she might now be able to keep up, do the work, make friends, etc.
- She "loves" two of her courses—psychology and Spanish—for reasons as best I could tell had everything to do with the combination of the personality and pedagogies of her faculty and their ages. Both faculty are relatively young, at most perhaps 15 years older than she, and also female. They use active teaching learning pedagogies and have the students engaged. One was praised for asking my niece to engage in thinking and activities that I would characterize as having "relevance" to my niece's life.
- She has two more classes both taught by women, one considerably older, with grandchildren, and for whom this course is the only non-graduate course she teaches. This is an introductory course to the major, elementary education. And this course is not engendering the kind of reaction I would want to create for students in their first major course. I suspect this faculty member is more appropriate to be

teaching graduate students but for whatever reason was assigned to teach beginning undergraduates—not a good fit.

- The other course taught by a female, and which my relative is not enthusiastic about is her English 101, in which she characterizes the professor as being “rude” and “not nice”. But my niece did allow that she is learning from woman being helped by this professor with her writing. I explained to her that one thing first-year students need to move beyond is thinking about whether or not professor so and so is “nice” or whether they “like” the professor.
- The fifth course is taught by a “really young” man, who is “kind of out there.” My relative wasn’t sure she was going to like this course at all but the very first weekend of the term, her faculty member of this course and another professor took the 14 students in this course (which sounded to me like an academically focused topically based first-year seminar) on a weekend camping trip to climb the largest mountain in the region and to discover and identify various geological artifacts of relevance to the course learning objectives. But what happened on this experiential learning field trip that mattered most was that my relative met other new students not known before, bonded with them, and, most importantly, met a young man with whom she developed a friendship which has led to her first date in college a week after the field trip!
- She likes the fact that even though she is starting a new chapter in life, nevertheless, some elements of her life are thankfully predictable: her part-time job in retail clothing store management, and her home life.
- She reports liking being able to return to her home to study and to finding her loving father and mother. These last two items of course challenged my research based thinking about the disadvantages for college degree attainment purposes of being both a commuter student and one who spends more hours a week in an off-campus job than she spends in class.
- This student’s first term course schedule was determined entirely by the institution. She never conferred with an academic advisor. The University sent her her class schedule.
- Overall, she notes her improvement in her attitudes towards her new educational institution, not her first choice school, and her increasing comfort level with being in college.

So what was I reminded of that I need to keep in the forefront of my own work with institutions trying to improve student success:

- Even the best prepared high school students are often anxious about starting college. Anxiety is both a motivator and an obstacle to learning. We must do things to reduce negative levels of anxiety.
- Early experiences in college matter (a great deal)
- Engaging pedagogies in the classroom matter too.
- A co-curricular experience very early in the term may greatly accelerate engagement, adjustment, and enthusiasm.
- Integrating experiential learning in a first-year course is a particularly powerful pedagogy, which increases interest in the official subject matter and bonding with faculty and fellow students.
- Early interaction with faculty outside of class matters.
- The selection of which professor teaches a student’s first course in the major, in this case an introductory course to a professional discipline like Education, matters in terms of the attitudes this engenders for the major.
- A student’s sense of adjustment and personal comfort is inextricable from making friends with other peers.
- If private, residential colleges think they are the only ones that can and do provide a beginning college experience comprised by small classes and high levels of engagement, they are deluding themselves.
- For the money, regional, public universities are a bargain.
- Gateway courses really matter—who teaches them and what kind of pedagogies are used.
- For some students there may be distinct advantages of not living on a college campus, particularly if such students have experiences that get them engaged and offset perceived disadvantages of living off campus.
- This student’s experience is the norm, not that of the residential college student which she had originally aspired to be.
- Students will generally make the most of opportunities presented to them. But it is the institution’s responsibility to provide such opportunities that comprise educationally and personally engaging learning.

I am a smart guy and I already know a lot. But I can always profit by being reminded of what I already know that is

most important. And by asking students to tell me about their experiences and being intentional about sorting out what the student and I can learn from those experiences, that may be generalizable to other settings.

I am glad I talked to this student today and asked her some leading questions and then just listened to whatever she cared to share with me. Moral of the story: you and I can't interact and learn from our students too much. Reminders are necessary and empowering for both the giver and the receiver.

If Ever There Was A Teachable Moment!

9-29-13

Timing in life is everything. I write two days before a probable shut down of the US government and 19 days before what may be the first default by the United States of our full faith and credit since the founding of our Republic. If ever there was a teachable moment, it is here; it is now.

No matter what your role in the life of your campus, if you have any contact with students at all, surely you can do something, even in the briefest of interactions, to encourage them to look at and learn from what is going on this week. What are the big questions they could be asking?

What is at stake here for them individually, for their loved ones, for their futures, for our country, for the world?

What does this tell us about what it takes for a democracy to work?

What did these elected leaders, college educated and privileged, NOT learn in college, that might have influenced them to think and communicate differently than we see them this week?

What happens when we put self-interests before the good of the larger community?

What is the value of compromise, consensus, standing one's ground, the consequences be damned?

What can a student learn about leadership style vs. substance?

What can be learned about how to achieve, discourage, obstruct, civility in our leadership discourse?

Who are these people leading

us? Who should lead?

What is justice?

As I find is so often the case, the questions may be more important than the answers? I am thankful this week for my liberal arts education that is helping me understand this week what in the world is going on; how in the world did we get to this point; and what might I personally be able to do about this.

We all have a role in getting our students to this point too. This is truly a teachable moment.

The Tipping Point in the Beginning College Experience: For Some It is Soon Too Late for a Second Chance

10-2-13

I am a former first-year student who got a lucky break. While I doubted I looked upon this at the time (January 1962) as a “lucky break”, it was. The “it” was being placed on academic probation by Marietta College based on my first term GPA of a .65 on a three- point scale. An auspicious beginning for the founder of the “first-year experience” movement! I won’t detail in this piece my tale of woes that led to this dismal performance. This piece is prompted by the fact that fall has arrived in my North Carolina mountain region and my memories often turn at this time of year to same period when I started college—the same period when about two million students are starting college right now.

Truth be told, I think about my own college experience every single day, for some reason or other. It was that important. And I am thinking about it even more this fall because I am formally engaged with my alma mater in an assessment process which my non-profit organization offers known as Foundations of Excellence. I will be headed up from North Carolina to Marietta, Ohio, in several weeks for a visit in conjunction with this work. No matter how many times I “go back”, I am always thrilled by the prospect.

This is the time of the academic life cycle when many of your students need a lucky break. You could be that lucky break.

Many of our students have already been developing a pattern of behavioral choices, which will cumulatively reach a tipping point beyond which they cannot recover academically and remain in good standing.

For decades higher educators have been touting this notion of the critical first six weeks. This sounds very logical intuitively; that what happens during this period can correlate with retention. But we know of only one research project that purported to substantiate this belief and that was in a very limited one institution dissertation study done about thirty years ago. Does that mean we should not be paying attention to the early college experience? No, of course not. But when and why students make a decision not to remain enrolled in college is a very complex matter.

I think that a more appropriate way to look at this is that preventable attrition has many causes and that they are cumulative, build over time, and take their toll at many different points during the undergraduate experience—end of first term, end of first year, end of second year, etc.

But let’s bring this back to you and your students. What could you be doing right now to intervene with some students who must be giving you some signals that they need attention? This is a good time. The first term is not quite at its half way mark. There is plenty of time and opportunities left for redemption! Because my readers have so many diverse roles vis-à-vis beginning college students, it is a challenge to make suggestions as to what all of us could be doing at this point in the calendar. Here goes anyway:

If you are teaching first-year students, it is most important that they have received some feedback by now on their academic performance. It has been my experience during the first six weeks that the majority of new college students don’t have a clue as to how they are performing. And that is our fault, not theirs. We must take steps to get them

grounded in reality. Feedback on performance is central to that.

If you are teaching first-year students you must also be teaching them the study skills they need to succeed in your course. You must demystify what it takes to be a good student in your course.

What's in a Handshake? A Start.

10-9-13

I write this reflection the weekend in September 2013 after both the leaders of the United States and Iran addressed the United Nations. This was also the occasion for much speculation about whether there not there would even be a "handshake" between the leaders of these two critical nations (to the world's prospects for peace) between whom there have been no diplomatic relations since 1979. I was very struck by how much media attention was being directed to the significance of the handshake. So I ask, what is the relevance of the handshake to our work with students? It's a start.

In western culture the handshake is a sign of respect. It is an expression or an attempt to span differences of power, authority, wealth, status to indicate some common basis of parity and equality. It is an act of civility. It conveys that those who engage in it have acquired the socially appropriate "manners."

When I had my own students at the University of South Carolina and they came to visit me during office hours, I would stand, invite them to come in, and when they did so I would put out my hand as an offer for a handshake. I noticed that very often they were surprised by this gesture. Were they struck by my formality? Or by my willingness to convey respect and a symbolic gesture of equality? I think largely the latter. Our students do not assume they are equal to us in any way.

There are so many ways in which we interact with our students that really matter. There are so many ways we could show respect, if we thought about it. And, if we thought about the projection of respect as a means to empower our students, here is another way to do that. One aspect of how we convey respect, and may start a supportive relationship, is how we arrange the space in our offices for interaction, assuming that students still visit us at all instead of texting or e-mailing, especially the former.

One of the first lessons I learned as a US Air Force psychiatric social worker from my first, supervising, mentor psychiatrist, was that it was really important how I arranged the furniture in my office. He wanted me to understand how the placement of the furniture either encouraged or inhibited verbal communication. It was a lesson I have never forgotten and practice 46 years later. So when my students at USC came to visit me in my office, the "student" chair was never placed in front of my desk. I never talked to my students with any intervening piece of furniture in the space between us. There were other ways of my maintaining appropriate social distance and I did.

During the 25 years I directed our University 101 first-year seminar, in our instructor training, one of the many strategies we suggested our instructors put into practice was the idea of a required "office visit" by each student in the first-year seminar, to the office of the instructor, during the first four to six weeks. It was really very simple. We asked the instructors to require a visit of each of the twenty or so students. Students were told that this would be for the purpose of getting to know each other; that the conversation would be informal, painless, and non invasive, respectful of privacy. We suggested some kind of sign up process and gave the instructors total freedom to do this or not, and if they did to determine what length of conversation to tell the students to expect. We told them that we thought even a five minute conversation would be salutary. In our training, we used this activity to discuss why out-of-class interaction was important; how to arrange office furniture to facilitate communication; and suggested they start the interaction with a handshake.

Over the years many instructors told me that they thought this process was one of the most important in which they engaged the students. The instructors reported that after the office conversation they could literally discern changes in levels of student engagement, participation.

What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?

10-10-13

Many of my readers will recognize the title, a lingering carry over from The Greatest Generation. I am a Vietnam Era vet but I am not going to write about my military experience (at least this time, positive as it was). I use this title language to evoke instead another question a child could ask a parent, or more to the point, a college student could ask a professional higher educator like my readers. The question specifically would be "What did you do in college?" And I would translate this to mean in effect, "What difference did college make for you?"

There is probably not a day that goes by that I don't think about this. We are all shaped by our experiences. And my college experience certainly shaped me. My evoking this line of thinking is timely because I am visiting my alma mater next week, where for me this all took place. This is not like returning to the scene of the crime. In reality, it is like returning to my birthplace, where I think I became the adult I am today.

I think it is important for us to share with our students what were the impacts (or to use the fashionable language of the day "learning outcomes") of undergraduate school on our development, values, thinking, careers, personal lives. At the very least, this can be a catalyst for reflection and discussion about what our institutions are doing to influence, inform, empower our students—or not doing.

So let me turn to myself as an illustration. I can honestly say that in my college experience, I learned:

that college is intellectually and personally liberating

how to have a miserable first term and end up on academic probation

how to get off academic probation

an experiential base of understanding the challenges of what I eventually named The Freshman Year Experience®

the sources and types of prejudice that I had brought with me to college

the origins and substance of my religious and political beliefs, which were profoundly altered during the first year of college

that the questions are often more important than the answers

what are the questions that I should be asking of myself, my country, the organizations of which I am a member, questions like: "what is justice?"

the value of a liberal arts education

what were the purposes my family had given me for going to college

what were going to be my purposes for staying and thriving in college

that my most empowering experiences occurred outside the classroom, actually in student government, where I had the opportunities to practice the writing, speaking, analysis, problem solving skills, I was learning in my classes

my models for the kind of professor I was going to become, but didn't have a clue this was in the cards for me

how to mentally process an enormous amount of information and create my own synthesis of what I had digested

how to do very, very hard academic work, and in prodigious amounts

the value of the mind/body connection learned in a varsity sport and a commitment to maintaining lifelong physical fitness

how organizations, particularly colleges, function, particularly with respect to dealing with change, promoting or

resisting it

a set of values, skills, behaviors and knowledge that I could use to serve my country

an unapologetic idealism coupled with old fashioned new deal liberalism to aspire to live a life of service to people less privileged than I was and am

how to be a change agent in and for higher education

how to better cope with the world as it would impact me by the knowledge and understanding I gained through the study of history, political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and English

how to develop a sense of personal purpose

how to stay focused on what matters most for success as an adult

how to let college develop my few strengths and talents to their fullest potential

and at the same time to build a professional life on one of my great failings: my first-term freshman year experience

how to respect and treat women college students as my friends and colleagues and not in terms of the stereotypical gender driven roles I had learned in my home and high school

and why I would want other college students to have the same kind of experiences and learning outcomes that I had been so fortunate to experience

I am just getting rolling here; this is just a partial list!

I suggest you prepare your own list of "LO's", learning outcomes. Ask your students to identify the ones they think they are experiencing. Have the students compare and contrast what you find. Have your students reflect and write on what this conversation inspires them to think.

I am so thankful for what my college experience did for me. What would it take for your students to feel the same way?

Elephant's Graveyard

10-14-13

What kind of manic tear is John on now? Not one at all. This is the title of a play that my wife and I saw the other day, that reminded me of what I already knew, but I can't be reminded of too often.

Elephant's Graveyard, by George Brant, was recently performed by undergraduate students at Brevard College. It is based on a true story of events surrounding a travelling circus that came to the small Tennessee town (not too far north of where I live), Erwin, in 1916. Unfortunately, a circus elephant tramples to death a circus worker as the animal rushed to pounce on some spilled melon and inadvertently crushed the head of the poor worker. In a chain of events that evoked for me an analogy to the current shut down of our government, a small faction of the town's citizens, understandably horrified by this death, decide to take matters into their own hands and kill the elephant. They do so by hanging the several ton creature using a railroad crane to facilitate the execution. The play is an allegorical presentation of mob psychology run amuck and the unintended consequences of ill considered actions taken by attention getting small factions of passionate citizens. As I watched this rendition of the rural south in 1916 I felt magically transported to Washington, D.C. 2013. I also saw retention strategies 101 in action.

So what did I already know but need to be reminded of? How to retain students! I saw the not-so- secret formula in action.

So how to retain students.....

- By engaging them in the total integration of the curricular and the co-curricular.
- By building a cohesive group of students doing something of socially redeeming value, which they also happen to love (in this case, acting).
- By integrating into a student peer group a professor, for intensive over time interaction.
- By integrating the teaching of important life lessons into what the students are experiencing in their real lives outside the conventional classroom.
- By engaging students in educationally purposeful activities that require the investment of large amounts of time, energy and commitment
- By creating a learning environment in which students form lasting friendships, with each other and probably the professor too
- By creating a learning experience in which students develop, learn, master, a set of transferable skills (in this case performing, presenting, speaking, directing, creating, critiquing)
- By offering them an experience which, literally, keeps them on campus many more hours than they otherwise might be—and then not wanting to leave that campus
- By creating a group setting where older, more accomplished students inspire and teach those more recently arrived in the academy
- By having them experience something which surely they will remember, even if it is not on the final exam!

Let's Try Going Wire[LESS]!

10-7-13

I wrote a post some time ago in which I suggested campuses needed to create some intentional, designated spaces for quiet, private, reflection, contemplation, solace and sanctuary. Good thing I don't earn my living writing this blog. My thoughts on this topic did not land me a best seller.

But I persist anyway. And this is prompted most immediately by a conversation I just had with a man in his thirties who was telling me about his recent ocean cruise with his wife. He told me it was so different having electronic disconnectivity (is that a word?) forced upon them by exorbitant rates on the cruise ship for wireless internet connection at the rate of 85 cents a minute. I asked him what they did in lieu of using their electronic devices and he replied that they drank and ate "a lot more." He also related that when they entered the return harbor "about a thousand passengers rushed to the outside uppermost decks with their laptops and smartphones to get reconnected." This recounting came the day after three of my colleagues had given me very specific feedback on what they described as my "practice of a 20th century communication style" which they defined as retaining a curious fondness for actually talking on telephones, and writing e-mail messages that included a salutation, conclusion, paragraphs, compound complex sentences. So there is not a day that goes by when I don't have some reason to think about how it is that we are connecting (or not connecting) these days and what are the consequences related thereto. This also leads me to reflect on what it might be like if we weren't so "connected."

Let me take that a step further. I would be very curious to see what would happen if a campus would declare, say, one day a term as a Wire[less] Day—a day when, except for medical and safety emergencies, no one use electronic communication. What would we do? How would/could we communicate? The expected norm would be that instead of sending a fellow student, professor, staff member a text or e-mail we would actually seek them out and speak to them. In order that the day is spent productively so that employees would not be paid for doing no observable work, the day could be set aside for in person convenings, discussions, and forums.

What a bonanza this would be for researchers! They would have a ready made laboratory to study what would a college community do in the absence of its now preferred modes of communication. Just how would people communicate? Would people expend more calories because they had to walk somewhere to speak to someone? Would roommates actually "talk" to each other? Would we find, as has been the case in studies of the New York City Blackout, and loss of TV cable in rural areas, that people (in this case the students) were more likely to have sex? John, that's going too far. But such is the gift of my academic freedom.

I am very serious though. I think that we ought to try a Wire[LESS] Day. I hope at least one place will and let the rest of know how it went and felt. My prediction is that others would want to try it.

These are The Times That Try Men's (and Women's) Souls

10-23-13

That was my conclusion after departing from the 20th "Students in Transition" conference hosted and organized by the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

This meeting had approximately 350 attendees from 160 institutions, 3 countries and 34 US states. The participants were a mix of faculty, academic administrators, student affairs officers, and a handful of students. While there was a range of ranks and roles represented, I would characterize this group as being predominantly either relatively new to higher education as a profession, or having a relatively lower level administrative/staff position. The practical implication of this generalization is that the overwhelming majority of attendees had direct contact with undergraduate students, and get to know them very well. The attendees also have direct contact with their supervisors who are more likely to interact with more senior leaders on the campus and feel various pressures and forms of accountability being passed down the chain.

I have attended these conferences for 20 years since I started the first one in 1995. And I have attended all the companion "First-Year Experience" conferences since the first one of that series in 1982. Over 70,000 educators have attended these meetings. And I have been in a position at all of these meetings to have professionally intimate conversations to give me a clear sense of the pulse of the times.

I found the pulse of the times this year putting these front line student support educators under more pressure than ever to "retain" students; in turn this is leading many to have serious reservations, morally, educationally, philosophically, educationally, and spiritually, about what they are being expected to do to retain students. They describe institutional leaders and senior supervisors as being "obsessed by retention." These educators are also questioning more than ever what is the purpose of college and what are the most important purposes of their own institution.

I can rarely ever say anything in a word. But this year at record levels, it all came down to one word: money. These educators are being asked to do more and more to simply generate revenue for the institution. And this is causing much dissonance, angst, and incongruence.

Policies are being reexamined to enable students to stay in college longer before being suspended. The longer they stay, the more they pay, even if they have to repay the loans they will be no better equipped to repay.

One participant announced "Developmental Education is dead!" This was a reference to the mounting political pressure in many states to curtail or eliminate developmental education. This action, particularly in the state of Florida where students can no longer be mandatorily placed in developmental education is deeply troubling to many of these front line colleagues. They fear that without some form of developmental/compensatory education that more entering students will be doomed to failure.

Frequently cited are the incidences of students who really are not motivated to do what students need to do to be successful. They are in college because it is socially expected or is preferable to low wage jobs for high school graduates, if they can be found. And there are the widespread experiences with students described as truly "immature,"

particularly males. I encountered many who really wanted to level with such students and recommend they stop/drop out. But they do not dare due this because of the pressure to retain students.

Like Some of our Students: Looking for the Meaning of Faith

10-21-13

I have been aware for some time that although the practice of conventional religious behaviors, like church attendance, falls off dramatically for first-year college students at residential colleges and universities, their interest in matters “spiritual” does not. And in this context, by spiritual I mean questions and thinking about ultimate values for living one’s life, perhaps in the realm of the sacred, but certainly also the secular. The basic question then for higher educators like me becomes do we respond to these spiritual interests of our students, especially those of us who work in state supported institutions, where, let’s hope, there is some respect for the principle of separation of church and state; and if we do respond to these student interests and needs, how do we do so?

I am writing this post a few days before I will be attending the annual Students in Transition (SIT) Conference organized by the University of South Carolina’s National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, which I founded in 1986. For approximately the last 15 years at both the SIT and the First-Year Experiences Conferences, my wife, Betsy Barefoot and I have been asked to join the leader of the conference series, Mary Stuart Hunter, in facilitating a session entitled “Spirituality, Authenticity and Wholeness in Higher Education.” This is an adaptation of a session we saw done at the 1997 meeting of the American Association for Higher Education, facilitated by Alexander and Lena Astin, Laura Rendon, and Art Chickering. We thought it was powerful and secured their permission to replicate it. Basically, this is a session for reflection and sharing, in which a variety of higher educators share their values and to what extent their current college or university employer is acting in ways that are consistent with the values of the individual educators. The idea here is that when our values are congruent with those of our institutional leaders and policy makers, then we feel more congruent, more whole, more authentic. And when we feel that way this rubs off on our students and they too are more likely to feel congruent with the institutional values and ethos. The challenge comes, of course, when the institution makes decisions, engages in practices that are not consistent with the dominant values of its community members. Just how do we cope with that and at the same time attempt to remain authentic and whole?

I want to make it clear that I write this with a self-identity by which I would describe myself as a very secular man, who attempts to use both feelings and rational thoughts to comprehend the challenges I face. I am not a member of any organized religious group. But I do have a set of values that are most important to me and by which I attempt to live my life. In that respect I would say that I engage in spiritual thinking and acting.

What really triggered my thoughts in this piece are two things—1) the actions of the Tea Party in shutting down the US government and wreaking havoc on the world economy and 2) a sermon I heard recently.

I said above I am not a member of any religious faith, although my culture is decidedly white, anglo-saxon, Protestant, because of my family upbringing. But I do accompany my wife fairly regularly to her Sunday church service at All Souls Episcopal Cathedral in Asheville, North Carolina. I do this as an act of fellowship with and fidelity to my wife. The most recent Sunday that I went with her we were delayed on our 35 mile drive to church by a serious accident on an interstate we must use. And that resulted in our arriving in the middle of the sermon, just as the Priest, Father Todd Donatelli, was saying something to the effect of “.....and this is why I support the Affordable Care Act.” Wow. That really got my attention. I was not used to explicitly political statements coming from the pulpit. This made me interested enough that I did something I had never done before: about a week later, while on a solitary walk on our mountain top, with the wonders of the internet and my I Phone, I logged on to the Cathedral’s website which made it possible for me to listen to the entire sermon, and how the priest got to be talking about the Affordable Care Act (see <http://www.allsoulscathedral.org/worship/sermons> and the sermon for October 6th).

This sermon was delivered at the end of the first week of the recent government shut down. I had become painfully aware of what the Tea Party didn’t want: the Affordable Care Act. It was less clear to me what they did want instead. As I struggled to understand their beliefs, I was persuaded that these beliefs were for these fellow citizens a matter of faith.

And that was what this sermon was about: faith—the meaning of faith. And as this priest laid this out—or at least this is my interpretation of what I think he was arguing, faith is not what you believe, even though that is often a conventional meaning of the term “faith.” Instead, he went on, faith is how you live. And how you live is a function of the choices you make. Our thoughts about who should govern, what we want government to do, who should receive health care and how, these all relate to beliefs that lead to choices, and in many cases actions. I came to

understand then the Tea Party faith as I observed their actions. It was certainly not the faith (choices/actions) I wanted for the health care of the American people, the flaws of the ACA notwithstanding.

I have written before of my theme of needing to be reminded of what matters most, of what I have already learned and come to understand—and now must continually put into action.

How Do I Learn What I Need to Know?

10-28-13

I think that is a question that all educators, including (I hope) the most senior leaders and managers of the academy need to be asking—in order to make the best possible decisions for student success. There are so many challenges to learning what we need to know, some of which are:

- the information we need is constantly both changing and growing exponentially
- our time to access and digest this information is limited
- information sources are both qualitative and quantitative and somehow we need to obtain both
- and now there is the developing use of analytics to enable prediction of student outcomes, and interventions related thereto
- and then we need a synthesis, Who will provide this? And if the leader doesn't create his/her own synthesis, there is always the danger of bias or worse (witness the creation of the "intelligence" used to justify the invasion of Iraq)
- some leaders in smaller institutions still do not have a robust IR infrastructure. But even if they did they would still need to consult other sources of information. But thank goodness the rest of us have IR colleagues. The question then becomes how much use and what kind of use do we make of them?
- I maintain that the best sources of information reside in people: their observations, knowledge, perspective, experiences, histories with the institution.

OK, so how do we get at that? To whom do we talk? Do we talk with the supervisors and highest levels of direct reports (for example, do CEO's primarily gather their information from their cabinet officers) and thus receive some information that is filtered? How far down the chain do we go?

Oh, so many challenges in learning what we need to know to make good decisions.

I will use the case in point that I know the best: myself. I am in the business of giving advice to institutions. And to do that I have to learn about the institution what I need to know to offer perspectives to institutional decision makers. So where do I go for the information I need to know.

First of all, I am a recovering former historian: I go to the primary (written) sources. By a review of boiler plate institutional primary sources one can glean a great deal about both the institutional culture, history, policies, practices, and more, such documents as:

- catalog
- strategic plan
- CEO/CAO's latest addresses to the faculty or whole institutional community
- Admissions viewbooks
- institutional website
- latest report to the regional accreditor
- IR Fact Book
- student newspapers
- assessment data: NSSE, CCSSE, etc

But what about the qualitative data that resides inside people's heads—some of that also being quantitative data? Who do I most want to talk to, observe, draw out?

students: I have never asked to meet with a group of students and had the institution pull together a focus group of its least engaged, least successful students. So, yes, you do need to talk to those that are "involved" and high performing academically, but you also need to talk to the opposite end of the spectrum. And where will you find them? One place is in special classes targeted at those populations, such as in college success classes. You will find some of them getting assistance in learning labs (although there you will be more likely to encounter the B+ students who are working hard to become A students!) And there are other places too, perhaps at random.

student athletes (particularly in the "revenue" sports, football and basketball): But I would go beyond that so you can get a sense for the different cultures of the different teams by both sport and gender. Which of these teams are more or less integrated academically?

the professionals and peers who provide academic support in learning and academic support centers. On a
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recent campus visit in discussion with a center director I learned exactly which majors are under or over represented in the center's census data. This confirmed for me why one engineering related major were the institution's high performers but left me with questions about why so many majors were underrepresented.

the professionals who do "counseling" with students for emotional, social, behavioral issues. They have keen observations on the most common patterns of student and institutionally generated stressors. On a recent visit to a campus I asked one counselor what was the most common problem she saw. The response: "generalized anxiety." The question then became what were the triggers for these anxiety levels and how many of those were under the control or at least influence of the institution.

financial aid counselors and administrators: We know that "financial problems" are the most socially accepted answers given by students as to why they leave an institution. But we have to get a lot further than that in our understanding.

academic advisors: perhaps better than any other class of educator, these often unsung heroes understand how the policies of institutions impinge upon students and either promote or discourage student success. But they are rarely asked for their insights by senior level leaders.

career counselors: who better to understand the vocational aspirations of students and their families, and often the mismatch between student performance and those aspirations

librarians: we are primarily in the business of preparing workers for the 21st century knowledge economy. Who better to understand the information literacy skills possessed by our students

faculty who teach first-year composition: Readers will recall the terrible shootings of over 30 students at Virginia Tec of a few years ago. Who knew the most about that troubled shooter student? Not a counselor/therapist, residence hall staff member, but faculty in the English department. In first-year composition, students are often allowed to write about what they know best: themselves. Their writings reveal much about the "baggage" they bring from their pre-college lives as well as the level of development of their writing and critical thinking skills.

faculty in general education courses: these are, we know, the courses students most want to "get out of the way" and in which problems of student motivation may be the most apparent. Our faculty are the experts on this critical dimension of the first-year, retention or attrition generating experience. It is these "gateway" courses that I am now prone to say comprise "the real first-year experience."

instructional staff of first-year seminars: this is one of my truly best sources of information on today's students, and how college is or is not affecting them.

residence hall staff, both resident assistants and resident directors: these students live both in and above the store. This is the environment where residential students spend the

student discipline administrators: while admittedly this is somewhat of a biased sample in terms of the perceptions these officers have of "student life", nevertheless, it is often noteworthy to have these perceptions.

student health professionals: it wasn't until the arrival of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980's that those of us who direct first-year seminar courses started including issues of health and wellness, particularly related to sexually transmitted illnesses, into the content of college success courses. But now this is a staple. And those who deliver health care are excellent sources of information on factors that affect the success of many of our students

family/parents: I have known since the first administration of the YFCY survey, Your First College Year, that when we ask first-year students to whom they turn for advice with college problems, their first line of defense is other students; and coming in second is family members. Families offer for our understanding a combination of knowledge about their family member's college experiences, a source of support, and also comprise one of the factors of stress on those same college students.

And I am just getting started on a list like the above. I never intended for this to be an exhaustive or complete litany.

There are so many sources of knowledge and insight to help us understand the dynamics of the student success experience on our campuses. All we have to do is seek these colleagues (including the students) out and invite them to share, listen, digest, synthesize, and then act ourselves. It's all right there for us to see. As my first University president and mentor said to me once with respect to the student riot that transformed his presidency and led my university to create the University 101 course: "The students have given me an opportunity for reflection on the meaning of student behavior." And then he acted on the power of that reflection and created the college success course as we have now come to know it and thus helped millions of future college students.

I am Right About...

11-6-13

In that part of my life as a blogger, I am rarely influenced by my office colleagues. That is to say they rarely ever suggest any topic for me to write about. Somehow, they just leave me to fend for myself although I do think of my writing the organization's blog as somehow speaking for the organization. Maybe that is extreme. This is a personal and professional medium of communication. I do know that I am primarily speaking for myself. I suspect my colleagues just think that I am capable of coming up with my own topics. And it is also the case that they have more important things to think about! I must say though that although the norm is that they don't influence me on my blog topics, they do influence my thinking in many other ways, particularly as a result of their teaching me about the things they know and can do that I usually don't know or can't do.

The other day was an exception. Somehow, I was talking with several of my colleagues about a matter about which I maintained I was "right." They teased me and suggested "John, why don't you write a blog about what you know is 'right'?" I thought about it. And I was leery. The world has too many other people who know they are right and they often end up killing each other to prove the point. And I don't want to be like them. I recall a member of the US House of Representatives, during the recent shutdown, a Tea Party proponent, who responded when asked why he/they had shut down the government responded simply, "Because we are right!" Don't you just love that certainty? If there is anything the college experience did for me, it made me a citizen who is a lot less sure that he is right.

So when I think about what it means to be "right", I guess what it really comes down to is what are some of my beliefs that are guiding principles or insights for me? What are some things about my world, especially that of higher education, that really do hold and ring true for me?

When I think about being "right" in this manner, I am not sure of the best place to begin. And I realize that this post could rapidly become a book. I won't let that happen.

So here are just a few things I think I am right about, and not in any order of priority:

1. Human groups—like colleges and universities—and the Republican party---will do whatever they have to do to survive and self perpetuate. This means that they can and will change. This is basic Sociology 101.
2. Organizations always have the money to do what they most want to do. The question then becomes what do we most want to do? This means that our shared work on student success all comes down to the perceived value of that work.
3. In my line of work, I have had a late career epiphany: the "real" "first-year experience" is not a first-year seminar; it is the "gateway course experience."
4. Some higher education, public policy, and government officials seem to like to trash the faculty. What I know for sure is that it is the faculty that the students come back to Homecoming wanting to see. It is the faculty who are named by donors as the inspiration for the big gift. It is the faculty who are the primary culture carriers. It is the faculty who outlast any administration. And the faculty have 1000 years of experience supporting or obstructing policy directives they like or dislike, respectively.
5. In this era when it is increasingly argued that faculty no longer need tenure, all I know is that without tenure at my university I would not have been able to be the advocate for students, institutional integrity, and academic freedom that I was.

6. What matters most is what we do to support the success of ALL students. There will never be the political will in this country to provide enough support for the most "at risk." Example: all students need some type of first-year seminar not just developmental students.

Where Were You Daddy...?

10-31-13

Where you when President Kennedy was shot? I remember all too well, and much more.

Have my two children ever asked me that? No. But I wish they had because that would have signaled to me that they had given President Kennedy even a moment's thought. But they were both educated in South Carolina public schools during their childhood, where it is safe to say that there would have been little reference to the late President. Strom Thurmond, yes, John Kennedy, no.

I wish I could think of a better phrase for this kind of an event than a "defining moment" but I can't. But that is exactly what it was for me. When I think back to my own four years of college, his assassination and the reaction of my college community to it, and my own thoughts and feelings, were the single most influential and memorable event of that four-year period for me, 1961-1965.

Now, on the other hand, I did ask my father multiple times during my childhood: "Where were you Daddy...when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor."

And he would tell me and apparently I never tired of the retelling, with each one taking on greater significance for me as I became more able to understand its significance for him. He was at a football game on that fateful Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941—he told me who was playing I am sure but I don't remember. I suspect it was an Ivy League game as he was a recovering former football player for Dartmouth and loved going to Ivy games in our region of the greater New York City metropolitan area spanning Connecticut (Yale) and New Jersey (Princeton) and New York City itself (Columbia). He would describe his emotions ranging from shock to anger to determination to avenge the attack and especially his unity with everyone else in that stadium— and his willingness to put aside his partisan disdain for the current occupant of The White House, Franklin D. Roosevelt. I thought of his retelling and my rapt listening to this story, when my wife and I visited for the first time this past January the Pearl Harbor National Monument. I am so glad I did that, and not only for the memories it evoked of my father.

He would retell me this story in part because it was defining for what he did and didn't do going forward in his life. Like millions of other men and women he volunteered to serve in the armed forces. But he was declined because his civilian role was deemed more critical to the national defense. He was a manager of a large factory, which rapidly had to convert to production of military materials. So he was spared possibly his life but always felt great regret that he had not personally been able to participate in the avenging that followed. President Kennedy's death confirmed my future direction too and hence was that defining moment.

I am posting this blog now about the 50th anniversary of the assassination because I have been thinking about this so much recently. If I can influence even one reader to talk with her/his students about this concept of a "defining moment" for a generation, this early posting will have been good placement on my part.

So what is the defining moment of this college generation? Is it the attack on the twin towers in 2001? Today's first-year students were only six then. What has happened since that they might have thought of as defining? What has happened since that defined them even though they might not have thought about it at the time or even

since? The launching of Facebook and then Twitter? The invasion of Iraq in 2003? No, they would have been only 8 then. A better possibility might have been the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 when they would have been 13, but even that is a stretch. What about the Newtown shootings of just over a year ago when they were 17? Probably not, seeing how rapidly that has had diminishing influence on our country so inured to the acceptance of gun violence. So, I don't know. You tell me.

Acknowledging One's Mentor While You Both Still Have Time

11-13-13

There's hardly a day that goes by that something doesn't come to my attention that evokes a memory for me of one or more of my mentors from my 32 year career for the University of South Carolina. I was so fortunate in the mentors that adopted me. And I, and all the readers of my blog, know that one of our most important roles is to mentor others, and to especially see that our students get mentored while they are with us—both by us and by fellow outstanding students.

This particular posting is prompted by the fact that I was called by a USC colleague the day before I write this, to tell me that one of my mentors has been diagnosed with a very serious illness. This is the occasion of my thoughts about this so special mentor, friend, colleague, and former boss.

I will be making plans to see him soon, if his condition and family will permit. But even if I couldn't, I know that this mentor knows what he did for me, what he means to me. For I have told him multiple times both verbally and in writing. One of the things that I have been most intentional about is affirming my respect and appreciation for my mentors directly to them.

This mentor, is [John J. Duffy](#). I went to work for John in July of 1983 and served him and the University as Vice Chancellor/Associate Vice Provost for Academic Affairs for the University's five Regional Campuses until 1996. John was the Chancellor and a Phi Beta Kappa historian, a true intellectual and academic administrator. But most of all a humanist who always put the University's interests before his own. Oh, I learned so much from John. To this day I occasionally find myself in situations that remind me of ones I found myself in with him and I recall how he handled things and what I learned from observing him.

In the search process for this position he asked me a question no one had ever asked me before and one I had never heard asked in a search process: "John, who are your enemies?" It took me more than a short pause to answer this question but I finally answered him that I had two: the University Librarian and the Athletic Director. But those are two other memories.

I saw him about a week later at some event. And he pulled me aside and said: "John, I need you to sign this document accepting my offer." I told him that I had not yet seen his offer and had no idea what it was. He told me: "Don't worry, you will be fine with it. If you don't trust me in this, you shouldn't come to work with me." I had already decided to trust him.

And that really sums it up. I trusted him. I never in 13 years saw him do or say anything that was not totally honest, personally, intellectually, and professionally.

One of the reasons one University constituency, female academics, trusted him, was that he really stood out from other males in his willingness to sponsor and appoint women to positions of power and influence. He never talked about this in any manner to call attention to his views on this. He just did it.

The first day on the job he, the Chancellor, asked me, the Vice Chancellor, if I knew the difference between a Vice Chancellor and a Chancellor? I told him, honestly, that I had

no idea. He told me that the difference was very simple: "the Vice Chancellor was a mouse trying to act like a rat, and the Chancellor was a rat trying to stay out of the trap!" The moral of this story was his telling me that a part of my job was to help keep him out of the trap.

One way to do that he taught me was to not put everything in writing, to not always spell things out in precise detail. More than anyone I ever worked for he taught me a tolerance for ambiguity

When and Why Should We Urge our Students to Get Engaged with “Service”?

11-18-13

I wish I had performed “service sooner than I did!

All during my undergraduate years no official of my college ever said to me, directly or indirectly, that I had any obligation to provide “service” to my fellow citizens locally or in national service. In retrospect, I find this hard to believe now given all the emphasis in high school, and often before, and then to a lesser extent in college, to urge developing citizens to perform some types of service.

I find it particularly hard to believe that I was never encouraged to do so when I consider that I started college just 16 years after the greatest exhibition of service in the history of the US, that of World War II when over 16 million Americans served in the armed forces.

The year I started college was also the first year of the presidency of John Kennedy who so famously exhorted us to “ask not what our country can do for you, but what can you do for our country.” But still, no faculty member, student affairs staff member (because they didn’t exist at my college in that era) or fellow student, ever said “John, how about engaging in service....?”

It wasn’t until several years after undergraduate school that I was finally introduced to “service” and this was not an invitation to “volunteer” but rather a direct order to perform service. I was on active duty in the United States Air Force and on my first day of duty at my first (and last) permanent duty station, at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. My squadron commander, who had my record and educational transcripts open before him on his desk, informed me that I “will perform community service” which he defined as doing part-time teaching on a local branch campus of the University of South Carolina.

I think about this as I write around Veterans’ Day, 2013. Regretfully, I missed the annual Veteran’s Day commemoration in front of the courthouse in the little North Carolina town where I live. I really look forward to gathering with my fellow “vets” and using this day as a special time for reflection on what this experience meant for me. I missed it because two of my colleagues and I were working in the context of a campus visit, a college that was not celebrating the day as an official holiday.

So this year I am reflecting, in part, in this writing.

Many of my readers, I assume, have the opportunity to advise students to consider engaging in either volunteer service activities or enrolling for service learning courses in which some of the mandatory content is non- remunerative performance of service duties. Is this kind of encouragement something we should be giving to all our students? What about those that are already doing this on their own? Or what about many of our students who already got very engaged in service work during high school? And what about our armed forces veterans who may have recently returned from providing service that the rest of us can hardly imagine doing ourselves? And what about our adult students who have already had so many service experiences in their communities?

Well, I think there are a lot of students still left! And it would be my hope that none of them would have to wait until they are almost 23 years old, as was the case with me, before anyone suggests to them they perform service.

This reminds me of a visit I made with my wife, Betsy Barefoot, to some dear friends of ours in Great Britain. They took us to visit an ancient priory in a medieval British market town. Behind the ruins of the priory there was a cemetery and it was strewn with trash. Right next to the priory and

Why Can't We Do the Cool Stuff?

11-20-13

This is one of the most compelling questions I have had posed to me by a student in a long, long, time. And I am thankful for it and to him. A word about the student who raised this with me and the institution where the student is enrolled.

Last week I had the privilege of visiting what was to me a very exciting place: Nevada State College (NSC), located in Henderson, a city of 250,000 just south of Las Vegas. NSC was founded and opened in 2001 so they are only 12 years old. They have hired the cream of faculty and professional staff coming out of our finest graduate schools. In contrast to many institutions I might visit, a consequence of the relative youth of this institution is that the median age of faculty at given professorial rank, of the department chairs, and many other categories of personnel is significantly younger. And a consequence of that is that many educators get an important shot at major leadership roles relatively earlier age wise than I would customarily see at other places. The College is the only publicly supported baccalaureate level college in the state. It is committed at all levels and contexts to achieving the goal of equity and for our larger society, the overarching goal of "social justice"...their phrase officially. The College is an open access institution (with the exception, for example, of their highly competitive -admissions Nursing program, a key need for the state and a significant factor in the founding of the College).

Nevada State College is a member of a national pilot cohort of twelve colleges and universities engaged for the next three years in a project provided by the non-profit organization I lead, which we have dubbed "Gateways to Completion®", G2C®. While I was on campus one of the many stimulating sessions I had was a focus group with students, all undergraduates as per the undergraduate mission of the College.

The only factors all students had in common was that all were academically successful, and most had had some experience with undergraduate faculty/student research.

The student who raised with me the question about "cool stuff" was the President of the Student Government Association who narrated his life journey that brought him to and now making his way through the College. Specifically, he had moved as a single father, at age 25, with a small child, from Louisiana to Nevada, to live with a sister, and to, hopefully, find employment. Arriving at the bottom of the Great Recession, finding employment was an extreme challenge. One day he had signed up for eligibility as a day laborer but was not successful in securing work. He had heard about the College and so the same day he came to the College to apply and begin the advising/registration process. Because he was late in that process he did not register for the full diet of traditional gateway course fare. Instead, he had the good fortune to enroll for one of his courses into one that focused on the use of film to study and learn cultural ethnography. He described this course and the impact of its professor on him as "life transforming."

This student body president went on to argue that he thought an overarching goal for this college, and any college, ought to be the creation of gateway courses that would be "life transforming." Of course, idealist that I am, I would and did agree. In the process of asking him to elaborate on his "life transforming" experience, he summarized his academic experience in this initial course as representing "the cool stuff." It was then that he posed to me the nettlesome question as to why more beginning college students couldn't be exposed to "the cool stuff" in their traditional gateway courses, and I came up way short in response.

Actually, there were really two compelling questions on the table: 1) what constitutes a "life transforming experience" that could be provided in the context of a credit bearing course in the

first term of a new college student's experience? and 2) what constitutes "cool stuff" that would be the triggers in such a course for a "life transforming" experience?

At the risk of doing these outstanding students less than complete justice in the reporting of their insights and ideas, this is part of what I walked away with:

Focusing on the Metrics of Retention: Higher Education with No Soul

12-11-13

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, a fellow higher educator wrote me to tell me that he/she was retiring. There were multiple reasons for the timing of this transition, but one of the factors was this educator's disaffection with contemporary higher education's concern with the "metrics to measure success." She/he said it much better than any paraphrasing I could offer so I will quote from this message, about which I have been reflecting since I received it:

"I had to leave just to save my sanity! Things were getting more and more interesting. I recognize the importance of metrics to measure success but when data becomes more important than developing the whole person I have to question how an institution defines education. I realized that I just could no longer be a party to the miseducation occurring in the name of progress or improvement as defined by increasing retention & completion numbers at all cost. I foresee students walking away w/degrees but no soul or the ability to define their role in society. BUT, we will tout increased metrics!!!"

My readers may recall that I have written around this topic before, said topic which I would define most generically as the purposes for higher education. So what's new about what this educator said to me?

It wasn't that the sentiments were new. But it was that the sentiments were so strongly felt that they contributed to this valuable colleague deciding to leave the academy earlier than she/he might otherwise have done. And it was the intensity and poignancy of the language describing the well intentioned but misguided overemphasis on completion and retention. As I have asked before: "retention for what?" And I found particularly compelling the assertion that ultimately this higher educational cultural and policy emphasis on the metrics of retention will produce students with "no soul or the ability to define their role in society."

It does appear to me that if not losing our souls, we in the academy, are being pushed by our external funders and policy makers into acting as if we have lost sight of the purposes of higher education, which go way beyond completion.

I am reminded of this because 11 years ago I was a participant in a think tank, literally, on a mountain top in western North Carolina, when our non-profit organization gathered some of the best minds we could assemble to develop a draft set of standards for excellence in institutional practices and policies that would define institutional excellence in the first year of college. We called these aspirational standards "Foundational Dimensions of Excellence". Our idea was that these could and we hoped would be used by institutions to measure their levels of current performance, and for the purpose of creating an aspirational plan to improve institutional performance. Previously no such standards had existed. This work on developing the Foundational Dimensions® was made possible by three foundations: Lumina Foundation for Education, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and The Atlantic Philanthropies. The good minds who gathered to undertake this task were Pat Terenzini, Bob Reason and Lee Upcraft of Pennsylvania State University; Edward Zlotkowski of Bentley College; and Betsy Barefoot, Randy Swing, Steven Schwartz and myself from our non-profit organization.

One of the so-called Foundational Dimensions of Excellence we produced spoke to the need for a clearly defined standard for excellence in the beginning collegiate experience as to how we introduce students to the purposes of higher education in general and the given institution in particular. We called that standard "Roles and Purposes" and defined it as follows:

“Find A Good Company and Stick with It”: What Advice Do We Give Our Students These Days?

12-9-13

That was the advice my father gave me repeatedly growing up. That's what he did and it sure worked well for him. He spent 43 years of his 74 year life working for one good, large company. He seemed happy and fulfilled, as far as I could tell. And his life in the corporate salt mine brought me many privileges and advantages. I know my father truly loved his company for it was the era of a social contract between corporation and especially its most loyal executives. Those days are dead. Now, rampant, international capitalism reigns supreme and without a soul. What brings on this rant from this higher education blogger?

Today I learned that a good friend of mine has just become a casualty of a large corporate layoff. I was absolutely crushed when I learned this. I could never have imagined this man would be let go. It would have been my assumption that any company would have found a way somehow to keep him. He loved his company, I know he did—it had been his for many years over three decades in the same industry. He always spoke well of it, so well that at times I felt this was too good to be true—and it ultimately became just that. He would reference proudly its humane culture in distinction to peer employers. He was the best at what he did of any employee in his peer group that I have ever seen. He was honest, loyal, conscientious, patient, considerate, ethical, collegial, friendly, cheerful, positive and upbeat, helpful, always focused on what was best for the customer. I am just shocked. But his industry was/is experiencing rapid and disruptive change. The company had to become leaner, consolidate. We all know the mantra, all too well.

And there is truth in it. He had become expendable, redundant. He didn't get the deal my father got, nor me.

I have been fortunate to live through the halcyon days of higher education. I received tenure at age 32 and by age 37 was a tenured full professor. I had professional freedom and security unimaginable in just about any other occupation. But today colleges and universities are drastically reducing the number of professors to whom they extend the kind of freedom and security they did to me. Universities are abandoning their paternalistic and “family” like cultures and have become corporatized. Increasingly, it is harder and harder to differentiate the cultures, policies and practices of the academy from the rest of corporate America. This saddens me, but I understand.

I suspect that my friend received the same advice from his father (or mother) that I received from mine: “Work hard son. Do your best. Honor your employer always. Be honest. Treat the Company's property as your own. Keep your bosses informed. Volunteer for extra work...” This wasn't enough. It didn't take account the factors in the world that we don't control. I know he practiced all the tenets of that line of sage counsel.

So what counsel do you give your students these days?

I had those tapes drilled into my head. And I put all of them into practice, and more, on my first job in the academy and then all the rest of my positions. But in my first one, it wasn't enough either. I was a young, non-tenure track, “temporary” instructor of history, at least full time. I had finished my first year. My students loved me. I loved them. I received outstanding teaching reviews. My departmental colleagues enjoyed and respected me. I was given additional responsibilities. I tried to do everything my father had taught me.

But early in my second year, I violated an unwritten rule that I had not known about and committed a gross faux pas. In my ignorant bliss one day in class at a regional, public, southern, single gender college, I recommended that my students see a movie made by the American Civil Liberties Union (the year was 1969). The movie was about the Chicago police riot that had taken

2014

Looking Ahead to 2014

1-6-14

It seems to make sense to be thinking about and looking ahead to 2014 seeing as it has already arrived!

Naturally, I want to be positive about what lies ahead this year, professionally and personally. And I want to be mindful about some of the things that I know or think are going to happen or may happen so that I can plan in advance how to respond to them.

Not that I intend to be simply reacting to these coming events, needs, issues, but also how might I influence or even shape some of them.

First of all, the big picture: what's going to be going on at the national level and how might that affect the aspects of higher education in which I and my non-profit organization are engaged.

Here at the opening of the new year, most of the economic indicators look positive. This suggests that some of our states will have the resources to increase public expenditures for higher education, if they have the political values and will to do so. Some of our states will have the resources but not the will. I live in one of those states.

This is a mid-term Congressional election year. So nothing big in terms of public policy may get done, except perhaps some action on immigration policy. That could be very significant for the slow but steady march to bring in more undocumented immigrants into the higher education opportunity stream.

The Obama Administration will release some form of new metrics for communicating to the public indicators of value added by colleges and universities. Surely, retention and graduation rates are going to become even more prominent in this paradigm. This will further up the ante in the arms race to increase student retention. That certainly has implications for my work as more and more college administrators will be feeling greater heat to get their numbers up.

Some of these colleagues of mine are already near desperation on this issue. And this will be only be exacerbated. This will lead to even more attention to the search for the holy grail of retention.

Even though there is no magic bullet, corporate partners will be offering us more of them; and surely the use of analytics to measure, predict, and intervene with students will increase.

The last year's end saw increasing skepticism about the role and value of MOOCs, but surely they aren't going to go away. They will be reconsidered and retooled and more high touch, real-time human interaction components will be added.

Late in the year more attention was also being shown towards private colleges taking the plunge, the gamble, that lowering their sticker prices and therefore tuition discounts, would bring in more students. Yes, the pressure on us to limit or reduce costs will not abate. Personally, I am skeptical that the price cutting is going to go very far. It's very hard to get your prices back up again once you lower them and that thought is sufficiently sobering to

limit this movement.

Will the increasing political focus on the left about income inequality be able to gain enough traction to lead to any state or Congressional action to lessen the cost burden for higher education on the poor and even the middle class? In the current national politicized environment, where one party is waging a war against the poor, I do not foresee any major advances in policies in making college more affordable. Any exceptions to this will be in solidly blue states.

One Person/One Policy Makes a Difference

1-13-14

Of all the one-liner adages I used repeatedly with my students it was “one person makes a difference.” As my career has progressed and I have seen what a difference both public and institutional policies can make in student success, I now combine the notion of “one person makes a difference” with “one policy makes a difference.”

Next Monday most US colleges and universities will be recognizing the slain civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, one of the best examples I can think of for one person who made a difference. And that one person’s courage, vision, articulateness, more than any one person except perhaps President Lyndon Johnson, led to the one policy in my lifetime which has made more of a difference in terms of how we all live with each other, the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

I am writing this piece coincidentally, 47 years almost to the day when I first arrived in South Carolina, in 1967 on active duty with the United States Air Force.

I began to immediately realize how far ahead the US military was than the rest of US society, especially South Carolina at that time, because of public policy, forbidding discrimination, in terms of fostering equal opportunity and a more enlightened approach to many things. The base, Shaw AFB, was an island of tolerance and opportunity surrounded by a desert of prejudice and de jure discrimination:

- Inside, on the base, all children went to school together. Off base the children were legally segregated.
- On the base, people of equal or comparable military rank were housed together. There was no housing segregation based on race.
- On base if one wished, it was possible to buy a cocktail, but not off base, at least legally (there was a restaurant about 15 miles from the base that did serve drinks illegally).
- On the base my boss (squadron commander) was a black man. Believe me, I did what he told me! And the first thing he told me was: “Gardner, you have a lot of education, more than anyone in the Squadron except the doctors (I was a psychiatric social worker in the 363rd Tactical Hospital) and I want you to do some ‘public service’.” When I asked him what he meant by “public service” he explained “college teaching at the University of South Carolina Extension Centers” and that’s how my career got started. Off base, I didn’t see black men supervising white men, anywhere.
- On base at recreation centers and all forms of “public accommodations”, we all (all races) recreated together. Off base, about 15 miles was a great state park (Poinsett State Park—named for a former US ambassador to Mexico who brought back with him the plant now named for him and universally gifted at Christmas time), and during my first visit to the park a ranger told me: “Our government in Washington is going to ruin this park by us ultimately having to have n----- in this park. And I tell you, the white folks, they will just stop coming.....”
- On base, we all ate together. Off base, many restaurants had this sign clearly posted on the front door: “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.” And they did. And all knew to whom this code message was directed.
- On base at the University of South Carolina center, students of all races and ethnicities sat in my classes together. Off base at two USC centers I taught at in Lancaster and Orangeburg, only white students attended.
- On base, condoms were openly displayed at the checkout counter, next to the candy in the PX. Off base, they were obtained only by whispering to a pharmacist what you wanted but couldn’t find on any shelf.

But that was then. And this is now. In some respects most of today’s college students in the Carolinas have no recollection of anything being legally segregated. Many of them, nationwide too, don’t understand what all this remaining fuss regarding “affirmative action” is all about. I understand. When I look at the data at every campus with whom I work and see the differential performance between black students and all others, I know the legacy of

discrimination, as well as continuing discrimination is alive and well.

Today, 47 years later, blacks are coming to that park in South Carolina. And the whites didn't stop coming at all.

And all children can go to school together, legally, and have been since 1970.

And all campuses, centers, and programs of the University of South Carolina are inclusive of all students. I had the privilege of teaching the first black student who enrolled at the University of South Carolina, Lancaster in 1968. I was thrilled to have him in my class.

And the signs on restaurant doors threatening discrimination are gone.

And we have equal access to all forms of public accommodations. And we can all go anywhere together. And we do. And we date, live with, and marry each other, the latter unless we are of the same gender.

While residential discrimination still exists, it is no longer a matter of legal practice.

And not only all persons of color were covered by the Civil Rights Act, but women too. That came as a surprise to many at the time when protection for women was slipped into the bill. This illustrates how broadly impactful Dr. King's work was and still is.

We can take this opportunity to remind our students that any of them, and any action of theirs that may lead to institutional, organizational, or legal policy change, can make a huge difference. And that's another good reason for them to be in college with us now. We need more game changers.

One man, one person, one act of public policy made all this possible.

And that is what I am going to remember and be thankful for next Monday, January, 20, 2014.

Talk about Partnerships and One Person Making a Difference

1-20-14

In the summer of 1972 I received a phone call that changed my life. It was from the most powerful person on my campus, the University of South Carolina, our President, Thomas F. Jones. I was stunned. He had an assistant page me at lunchtime in a Columbia, S.C. restaurant where she had somehow tracked me down. The President came on the line and said "Hello, John, I would like you to do me a favor...." (I had never met the man before and had no idea he knew who I was, a brand new untenured professor in a faculty of about 1400). Of course, I replied I would be glad to, and quipped because it was a month after the Watergate burglary "...as long as it is not illegal or unethical...." He got a kick out of that smartass retort and went on to explain to me that he was putting together a sort of "think tank" that would represent a "partnership" that would be presented in a workshop. This all sounded terribly vague to me and so when I asked him what the workshop would be about, he said: "John, you don't need to know that now; you will learn about that in the workshop." And then he added, "And, John, if you like the workshop I would like you to teach a course for me!" Being a professor I understandably asked him what kind of a course. And he replied "John, you don't need to know that now; you will learn about that in the workshop." So off I went to this workshop/think tank, which lasted for three weeks, five afternoons a week for three hours an afternoon.

I discovered that this "partnership" the President referenced in his invitational command performance phone call to me was between a group of faculty, academic administrators and student affairs professionals. This was quite a revelation for me as an introduction because I had no idea what student affairs professionals were. They didn't have any at my undergraduate institution in the 1960's and so I had no personal or professional experience or contact with this very new profession.

The purpose of the workshop/think tank, by the way, was to design the University 101 first-year seminar course and to reengineer the first-year of college experience at the University of South Carolina. Two years later I was made the first faculty director of the course. The President participated in every minute of this 45 hour workshop and he became my mentor who opened the door of my life career.

I am thinking about this important concept of "partnership" because the non-profit organization I lead just completed our second offering of a professional development event we entitled "Academic and Student Affairs Leaders' Institute: Partnerships for Promising Practices in Student Success." This event was attended by teams from 53 post secondary institutions.

As we closed the meeting on Friday afternoon, January 17, I was reminded that we were all about to start a holiday long weekend to commemorate the life and work of Martin Luther King—AND that his life was a perfect example of a life dedicated to "partnerships." I pointed this out to the participants, and that he and his creation of powerful partnerships was a wonderful example of a favorite adage that I have written about recently: one person can make a difference.

I heard Reverend King's "I Have a Dream" speech when I was 19 years old. He was murdered when I was 24. These were very formative years for my own development as I became more and more intentional about what kind of an adult I was going to be.

I noticed how he based his actions on a set of core values and beliefs. I observed the consistency and interconnectedness of these beliefs with the major issues of those times, which were also my issues. I saw that he was not only concerned with his fellow African American citizens but all people. I saw that he was trying to advance opportunities for all people. He was trying to end prejudice and discrimination against all people ("brothers and sisters"). I saw that he was an advocate for children and adults; and for people of all faiths. And for people all over the world who were oppressed by injustice.

This meant that he became a leader of not only the Civil Rights movement in the United States but also a leader of the movement against the Vietnam War. And he was a champion for the rights of college and university students too.

It became very clear to me that this man believed in partnerships with an incredibly broad diverse range of constituencies and their people. He got all kinds of players together that had never come together like this before. So eventually we saw religious leaders from many faiths joining political leaders, educational leaders, business

leaders, and ordinary citizens of so many persuasions—all for common causes. And what he accomplished changed the world as I had come to know it around me in the 1960's. The lesson that one person can create powerful partnerships that transform institutions was made more clear to me than I had ever understood it before.

For me this intersection of my own recent professional work on improving academic/student affairs partnerships (which has really been a theme of my work spanning my entire career) with the literal observance of the holiday weekend celebrating Dr. King's life, was a powerful congruence for my reflection and resolution to carry on.

Seven Principles of Good Practice for Student Success Partnerships

1-22-14

This is my second blog since our non-profit organization finished hosting on January 17, its second Academic and Student Affairs Leaders' Institute: Partnerships for Promising Practices in Student Success. And I am going to use this posting to share a document that grew organically and intentionally out of the first such meeting we held in November of 2012.

The document I want to share is entitled Seven Principles of Good Practice for Student Success Partnerships.

I am doing this in this blog format because even though we released this important statement almost a year ago, and have had it posted for free access on our Institute website at <http://www.jngi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/7-Principles.pdf>, there are still many people I would like to influence, and who are readers of my blog, but who have not yet seen this statement.

These principles were produced by the staff of the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education with very significant ideas and other forms of input from the 160 or so participants at our first Student Success Partnerships Institute.

I also want to acknowledge our lifetime respect for the work of Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson and their hugely influential Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, 1987. These two friends and colleagues of mine have been of great influence.

Please then consider and feel free to use and adapt the following Seven Principles of Good Practice for Student Success Partnerships:

The College Pipeline is Visible Long Before...

2-19-14

On purpose, my wife and I when we took early retirement from the University of South Carolina, decided to live in a small, rural, somewhat isolated, town, a county seat in western North Carolina, of 6000 people—Brevard. It was a wonderful choice. The climate is moderate. Mild summers. Is a college town with a small private institution, Brevard College. And it is the home of an internationally acclaimed classical music festival every summer, the Brevard Music Festival. In reality, it's not all that "isolated" as it is only 24 miles from our home to the Asheville Regional Airport and about 35 from a wonderful small city, Asheville. And no buildings fly the Confederate battle flag as a state authorized act of political compromise.

Part of the attraction was our belief that some of the problems that face our country would not be quite as in our faces as if we lived in a larger community. But, of course, you can't keep the culture out. So in that sense, we are not isolated at all.

I was reminded of this recently when my wife and I attended a community event of which we were a co-sponsor.

The event was a talent night for local youth from ages 10-18. It was organized by the local Transylvania County Arts Council. We really enjoyed seeing the talents of these wonderful kids who seem so secure in this small town, nurturing, safe, environment. But what we saw also reminded us of many college campuses in terms of who was and was not performing.

There were twenty "contestants." Eighteen of the twenty were female. Many of the young women performed solo. Neither of the males did. And there were no children of ethnicity other than my own. Hence on both variables of race and gender this group of talent was not representative of the larger community.

The female talent primarily sang songs performed originally by female artists who were often sultry and suggestive. One twelve year old sang about "The House of the Rising Sun." I couldn't help but wonder if she understood what kind of a "house" she was singing about. But all of these youngsters persuaded me they were trying to be much older than they were/are.

Most of them gave credit to their parents. Three of the women thanked especially their fathers. I was especially glad to hear that. Some of us men are doing something right. One of them described how she and her father had co-written the song she was about to perform, and how they also wrote poetry together. Let's hear it for fathers who are more liberated than mine was.

The next day I communicated with the Arts Council Director and indicated that my wife and I would gladly sponsor next year's event; but I asked her if it would be possible to work on getting underrepresented students involved. She expressed her frustration in not being able to get young males and African American children involved. She had no explanation for why the males were not engaged (I did but I didn't offer any); and she attributed the lack of involvement of minority children to "parents who won't or can't help with transportation." If only it were as simple as that.

We can't start too early to address the pipeline of who goes to college. I am absolutely

convinced our community, as encouraging as it is, is not showcasing the talents of kids who really are talented. Brevard just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the racial integration of its high school, the first in the state to take this step. We still have a long, long way to go. My wife and I are playing a small part. That's what we all must do. We have to take concrete actions in our own respective spheres of influence and do whatever our talents make possible.

33 But Who's Counting? I Am!

2-21-14

I have just attended the 33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience, held in San Diego, February 15-18, 2014.

Over 1800 higher educators attended from 16 countries. The meeting is truly an "international" meeting without being designated as such.

Representatives came from over 700 institutions, disproportionately four-year, a tradition over 33 years try as hard as we have to invite more participation from community colleges.

When all the first-timers were asked to stand at the opening session, I estimate more than half the audience stood up. Obviously, the future of any movement depends on a dependable stream of newcomers.

Subjectively, my take was the majority of attendees were entry to mid level staff and administrators, and disproportionately student affairs professionals. But they were definitely joined by many academic administrators and faculty to create a partnership focused on one sole objective: increasing first-year student success. Unfortunately, that definition of success has now become characterized primarily as "retention" and the preeminence of the academic mission now seems much less in evidence. This convening of multiple types of higher educators has been a consistent goal since 1982, the beginning.

California post secondary education was very well represented. This struck me as testimony to the fact that California is back, getting beyond the worst of the recession. And the CSU System appears to be the big investor in first-year work, allocating 12 million dollars for efforts to bring at least one High Impact Practice to every one of its 450,000 students.

The topic most likely to be represented on the agenda was another conference tradition, the same subject the very first meeting was about: first-year seminars. It is very hard for organizations to escape their traditions. And sometimes it is just appropriate to make the best of them. Thus, this conference remains the go to professional meeting for professional development regarding first-year seminars.

In my wildest of imagination, I would not have anticipated 33 years ago the size of the shameless commerce contingent that has latched on to this gathering: some 125 participants were exhibitors. What are they selling? Primarily potions and elixirs promising to assuage the evils of attrition. The conference has become the vendors' equivalent of the promised land populated by several thousand desperate administrators and staff in a relentless search for the holy grail of retention, a quick fix, which now all they have to do is buy it.

I use the occasion of the conference to talk to as many attendees as possible, often randomly, and usually very informally. I did not interact with one who didn't just rave about the value of the conference.

I am often asked if I knew in 1982 what all this was going to amount to. Of course, I did not. But I did know that I was on to something really big and that it was very important to

hang in there.

And, at the very least, that is exactly what happened. I am gratified far beyond what the above words convey.

What's Not to Like?

2-24-14

Please consider this a dispatch from New Zealand, a country that has opposing political parties but nothing like the divide we have currently in the US. I have to get out of our country every now and again just to remind myself that we could be living differently, if only...

I have just attended the 33rd Annual First-Year Experience Conference and San Diego and instead of returning immediately to our home base in Brevard, North Carolina, my wife and I are taking a two week vacation largely in New Zealand and a brief time in Australia. I am writing from a country where my fellow US citizens of the right could not imagine people being happy in a country that provides generous social welfare benefits.

This posting is being written on the third anniversary of the Christ Church earthquake in 2011, which took the lives of 168 people. We were there 3 years ago today and departed about three hours and forty minutes before the quake struck. I have always had more than my fair share of good luck.

On our way to New Zealand with a brief stop in Sydney, Australia, it was not necessary to tip in restaurants—unless you are staying in a hotel or other establishment that caters to Americans who expect to have to tip. For you see Australia has a minimum wage law, just as we do, which currently is 16.50 Australian dollars (=14.83USD) an hour. Compare this to the 7.25 USD for American workers except tipped workers who are guaranteed a Federal minimum wage of only \$2.13 an hour. As I thought about this in Sydney, I realized that through tipping in the US to make up for the lack of a living wage for tipped workers, I am, in effect, subsidizing what would otherwise be a living wage paid to such workers in some other countries and thereby also subsidizing profits of restaurant owners, all thanks to the power of the restaurant/hotel lobby in our nation's capitol. Now don't get me wrong, I am not opposed to tipping. I want all my fellow Americans to earn a decent living and be in the middle class. I am an American who is thinking a lot more these days about the structural inequality in my country and the effects of that on all citizens, especially college students. It only takes me being out of the country and visiting Australia and New Zealand to remind me how other advanced countries manage to do what we seemingly cannot: raise the minimum wage to a level where people can actually support themselves on it. But on to New Zealand.

Spent a full day in Auckland a city of 1.377 million people. Didn't hear a horn blown once. It was explained to me by a native, that horn blowing is viewed "as an extremely aggressive act" which is considered to be very bad manners.

On this same day in Auckland, I did not see one single police officer. I am just trying to imagine being in a US city of comparable size and hearing no automobile horns and not seeing the constabulary.

If you go in a restaurant even for a light meal, you need to check your American impatience at the door. And definitely allow more time than you would in the US for a comparable meal.

On the front page of an Auckland newspaper this morning was a story of a hit and run accident, in the course of which a bystander stole a bicycle that had been involved in the

accident. The paper opined with a question: what is New Zealand coming to that someone would steal a bicycle?

This is also a country with 3% unemployment under a Conservative government, something the Republicans in the US have never been able to accomplish. And the economy is booming in full recovery mode, unlike the United States.

It's All in the Shirt

2-26-14

There is nothing like even a first full day of vacation to put some things in perspective for you—specifically, what's happened to the gender expectations for a dress code—and very specifically, men who don't tuck their shirts in.

I have been reflecting on this for a long time, and I am getting more and more disturbed about this: men dressing like slobs in comparison to well dressed women in their intentional company. I am seeing this everywhere around me in the States. My wife says I should not be troubled by this and that "it's only a fashion statement." What kind of a fashion statement? The women are wearing cocktail dresses, semi-formal evening wear, with make up, jewelry, high heeled shoes, the works. And the guy is in jeans and has his shirt out.

When I see this I also hear a voice, that of my deceased mother: "John, tuck your shirt in." Or my also deceased father: "John, tuck your shirt in."

I ate dinner tonight with my wife in a fairly small and intimate, but very upscale restaurant in Auckland, New Zealand. It was on a Friday night, date night. At first one heterosexual couple came in: woman all decked out, guy in jeans and shirt out. No jacket. OK, this is an anomaly. Then another couple comes in: same thing. I am just beginning to feel out of place. And then two couples come in and sit down right next to us. I really can't ignore this. Both women, all dolled up. Both men: jeans, shirts out, no jackets.

And yours truly, well he obviously is a man of the mid twentieth century. Why would so many higher educators in my country still be seeking advice from me on anything---and certainly not fashion? What am I wearing: dress slacks with cuffs, shirt tucked in, and a navy double breasted blazer with brass buttons. I must have looked like one of their former British colonial overlords.

Why am I thinking so much about men and their shirts out? Because on some level for me it is connecting to the patterns I see on campus, where women make more of an effort. Women not only are looking more successful, for the most part they are more successful. Men want to let it all hang out. And it's not a pretty sight. Men want to be free of many social constraints, this one (shirts tucked in) admittedly a minor one that should hardly chafe. And many men are not making very good choices with the more important options they have with their uses of freedom, the ones that matter far more than whether the shirt is in or out.

Anyway, it might be worth a try to address this. Consider it a pilot. Urge your male students to tuck their shirts in and see if their academic performance doesn't improve. Certainly this "modest experiment," to quote Jonathan Swift, couldn't make matters worse. And if men were to start wearing their shirts in again I would feel so out of it.

Really, the problem has to be with me. If only I could just bring myself to untuck my shirt and let it all hang out. Maybe this would help my aging image and even more higher educators would be asking me for advice on how to help college students be more successful, especially young men, probably with their shirts out.

The Intentional Tourist

3-6-14

This posting was inspired by a conversation I had on a flight from Sydney to Auckland and by the 1985 prize winning novel by Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist*, and also the movie of the same title.

But I am writing as an "intentional" tourist, not an "accidental" one. I didn't used to take many vacations. And I was eligible for four sabbaticals in my three decades at USC and didn't even take one. I am not proud of that. It would have been good for me on many levels had I done more of both. I guess I thought I was just too indispensable to be gone very long. But one of the many good things that has happened to me in my later life as a result of being married to Betsy Barefoot is that we do take vacations, albeit ones with our laptops in hand to keep in touch with our many colleagues, who expect us to be available to honor our contracts with them and their institutions to be available on demand.

Let me state the point of this before I go any further. I am suggesting that my higher ed readers think about spending some more time as "intentional" tourists on their own campuses and get into random conversations with students as a source of inspiration for them and for you!

I fly a great deal, understatement. And once the aircraft is in flight (meaning not taking a mechanical delay) and sufficiently on time to make my connection (I fly out of a "downline" airport and have to connect to almost anywhere) then I relax and have some of the most private time of my working moments. I say "private" because no one is talking to me, and no one can reach me by phone (at least until the FAA allows us to receive phone calls in flight). On the wireless equipped flights, now people can and do reach me and vice versa. I say "no one is talking to me" because I intentionally, and assiduously avoid striking up any conversation with my seatmates. I am not rude about it; in fact I make a special effort to be my usual very polite self to my fellow passengers; but I just want to be left alone and get my work done. I must confess, I do a lot of last minute preparation on planes and this is critical time for getting myself "up" for the presentation I am often going to do at my destination.

One of the two protagonists in *The Accidental Tourist* is a middle aged, single, writer of travel guides. In one of his guides he gives advice to readers on how to avoid talking to seatmates on airplanes and how to deal with the seatmate from hell who just won't leave you alone. But, alas, even this sage traveler has met his match in one hilarious episode where he cannot shut up the seatmate no matter what stratagem he employs. Seeing this scene in the film was even funnier than in the novel and was truly unforgettable. In the film he goes through a transformation as part of a love story, after he serendipitously meets a women in a veterinarian's office. He has had a career of being an intentional traveler to write intentional travel guides. But his new relationship transforms him in many ways, including into an "accidental" tourist with his new companion.

Now this flight of mine that I referenced in my opening above, was not to tell a tale of the seatmate from hell. In fact, he was just the opposite. It was my way of putting this exchange in the context of my normal practice of not talking to seatmates. But my wife was with me and she does talk to seatmates. She is also better prepared and always has fewer last minute preparations to make en route. Our third seatmate, who was sitting next to me on my right, with my wife on my left, was a mid 20's male, from Canada as we learned. Even though he was not a university student, he was having a "high impact practice" experience, namely, travel abroad. He was en route to New Zealand to meet a female companion for hiking on the South Island. And she was a relatively new item in this life as he had terminated a prior relationship we gathered, in the not too distant past. His former woman friend was the daughter of a large Canadian city public school superintendent whom we deduced may have had reservations about this young man because he was not yet university educated. Like most of my US college students he was in search of adult life purpose. My rare plane conversation with him reminded me of so many I have had with my own college students. There is just no source like this to be reminded of the purpose of our work.

Like many of my and our students, this gentleman had a peer group of friends who in the 25-30 year old range were all in the process of settling down and mate selection leading to marriage. They were also focusing on settling into careers. This young man, whose name was also John, explained that most all his friends were university graduates. And Betsy and I as we listened to him were having cognitive dissonance, as he definitely sounded educated beyond the high school level. John spoke to us about his wanting to settle down and have a family, and hence the need to get much of his wanderlust out of his system first, as in trekking in New Zealand.

John also told us something that most of my American college students would not. He did not aspire to a white

collar job. Instead he wanted to be a professional firefighter in a major Canadian city. He explained to me that the starting salary was about \$50,000 Canadian, and that then annual earnings ranged between 50 and 100,000. He literally said that in his country it was possible to live a very decent middle class life without a university education and that he intended to do so. In preparation for his chosen occupation he had been working as a professional firefighter in the Canadian “bush” both because he loved the outdoors and that it would make him competitive for his career goal of being a salaried city firefighter.

We enjoyed talking to him. He personified the stereotypical Canadian politeness and articulateness. He was a young adult who clearly knew what his values were and was living consistently with them. He had a strong sense of purpose towards which he was an active searcher.

This conversation was serendipitous. Neither party had sought it out. Of course, I gave him feedback and hopefully that was useful to him. I found myself wishing that my American students could even think about gaining entry in the middle class as autonomous self-supporting young adults without a college education, and in a civil service job that provided a decent standard of living. Of course, the reality is that in many states at least one party is at war with public servants and blames them for the national debt (as was argued in Ohio and Wisconsin by politicians attempting to reduce the benefits of public, unionized state employees, like teachers, professors, police officers and fire safety professionals).

I don't work on a college campus any more. And I miss my serendipitous conversations with them—and the more intentional conversations that I scheduled as well. I envy those of my readers that have more opportunity than I to talk to our students. I urge you to take maximum advantage of this by being an intentional tourist on your own campus. When talking intensively to students becomes “accidental” maybe you need to ask yourself if what you are doing is really worth it.

What is Your Goal?

3-14-14

This posting was prompted by a phone conversation, a relatively brief one at that, I had from New Zealand, where I happened to be on vacation, with my nine year old grandson, Jon David, on the occasion of his birthday.

His birthday happens to be February 22. So, naturally, as a recovering former historian, I asked him if he knew which American President's birthday he was born on. He gave me an immediate correct answer and then went on to elaborate why George Washington was so important in our history. So far so good. I was impressed, particularly because I am paying for a world class private school education for this child.

Then I missed a perfect chance to quit while I was ahead. I asked him: Jon David, what is your goal for your ninth year of life? Without hesitation, he replied: "To relax"! And then without further prompting he elaborated to say that that had been his goal for previous years and that he had been able to attain that goal.

After this brief conversation, my wife, Betsy Barefoot, gently chided me for asking a nine year old boy for his goal for the year. She said: "Oh John, he is just a child."

But then we started reflecting on what we know about this child. He is not a relaxed kid. He is a typical American middle class kid whose parents have him busy in various activities almost beyond my imagination, so different was my own childhood. He is in a rigorous, Episcopal, private school, very probably the best pre-college school in South Carolina. He plays soccer, basketball, and baseball. And, because his mother, my son's wife, owns a very successful dance studio, this boy has gone, as my son says "dance nuts"! This means he is at his mother's studio essentially every day and is both taking lessons and dancing competitively. The descriptions I receive of the child from his father would lead me to believe that he is investing more time, energy, effort, and commitment to dance than anything else in his life, just like his mother. And yet he is totally imbued with the South Carolina macho male culture and I would describe him as "sports crazy." He is truly a walking encyclopedia of sports statistics, a knowledge that not one bit of it was contributed by this grandfather.

So why, I ask, doesn't he have any other goals? Surely, every upwardly striving middle class kid who aspires to go to a good college has goals by age 9. It's not like this kid was first generation. To the contrary, I am second generation and my son is third generation and so this kid will be fourth generation. And both his parents are college educated.

Those of us who work in the "student success" field know how important a variable correlating with student persistence is the development of life purpose on the part of students. And we can't do that if we haven't had some experience and success with developing goals.

Of course, we have to take what walks in the door. My grandson is making me wonder anew how many of our entering students arrive on our doorsteps with no history of goal setting.

I look back on myself as an example. Did I have a goal for my ninth year? Well, yes, kind of. And it was a goal imposed on me by my father who moved his family in the middle of

my ninth year, to another country, because his US company moved him to Canada to run a Canadian subsidiary. So I suppose I did have a goal for my ninth year, which was to make a successful transition from living in the US to living in Canada, starting a new school, and making new friends. But did I freely establish that goal? No. It was really imposed on me. Nobody appears about to impose on my grandson a goal for his ninth year.

Using Vacation for Reflection on the Mundane and some Eternal Verities

3-13-14

I have just spent 15 days in New Zealand and Australia, on vacation, with a wonderful companion, my very smart and thoughtful wife, Betsy Barefoot. I can never set aside my higher education perspective and thinking about what it might mean to be a college student in a country I am visiting, as compared to the United States. Vacations abroad are also always opportunities to reflect on eternal verities. Some thoughts:

1. Everywhere I looked, people of all societal levels were using American technology, much of it produced in the Far East. One iconic American company in particular is taking its operating profits out of Australia and transferring them to a tax haven "scheme" in Ireland.
2. American music is ubiquitous, and usually not jazz or country.
3. But in both countries some of the taxi drivers listen to classical music.
4. Bruce Springsteen sells out in New Zealand too.
5. We rarely ever heard an automobile horn.
6. People were much more patient than many of our fellow citizens.
7. Auckland, Wellington, and Brisbane are beautiful, world-class cities where American college students would have a ball.
8. Our random, visual, non scientific, surveys yield the observation that obesity is less prevalent than in our country, despite the ubiquity of McDonalds and its genre. In all cities we were amazed at how many runners and cyclists we saw. And I noted that McDonalds is fully functional even though it must pay much higher minimum wages than in the US and to which it is objecting in the US.
9. Citizens feel very safe. This is especially remarkable to me as I noted unaccompanied women running, hiking, cycling virtually everywhere, which I would not see in the US.
10. Older citizens think that the young really don't want to work very hard and are looking for handouts.
11. Older employed workers feel their governments are too generous to younger people who are less than fully employed.
12. In both countries there are political parties, which have some analogs to our two party system, but in neither is there the deadlock or vitriol we observe on a daily basis in the US, directed by the opposing members to the opposite party.
13. In New Zealand, one political party is particularly popular with aging, white, men, who have some similarities to the same cohort in the US.
14. Auckland is now more diverse than London, with over 200 nationalities and ethnicities represented.
15. The news events we observed getting the greatest coverage over two weeks were the outcome of the Academy Awards selections and the crisis over the Ukraine. But Hollywood trumped the crisis in the Ukraine by a long shot. During the actual awards ceremony which dragged on for hours for American viewers, it did the same for listeners in New Zealand, who were deluged with minute by minute news flashes about who had just won what.
16. Staff working in the hospitality industry in hotels and restaurants do not expect to be tipped for providing service and for doing the right thing. In part, this is because both countries have very, very generous mandatory minimum wage thresholds for their citizens.
17. And very low unemployment rates, about half that of the US. It helps to have governments that really do have job creating policies.
18. Some of the best speakers of English we met were European students working in New Zealand restaurants on work visas while they were on a "gap year" after high school. I felt so glad that now especially women both have this kind of freedom and are exercising it. Would have been unthinkable when I was a college student. We talked to one server whose English was so perfect we could not place her diction from any part of the world, and then after failing to guess her nationality learned she was from Germany. What if we could produce the same kind of fluency in our high school and college students and then send them abroad to "practice?"
19. It is a good idea for educators to go somewhere every now and then where they are the ones with "accents." Come to think of it, I often felt that way talking to my students at the University of South Carolina.
20. Construction is booming everywhere. And the connection between that and full employment is glaringly obvious. I can only hope that returns to the US.
21. The economic indicators we saw in full bloom are what we would like to see for our college graduates at home, who, as the latest annual Freshman Survey reports, are more concerned about financing college than ever.

22. Young people at all social levels are having children. It sure helps when you have national health insurance.
23. As in the United States, there is a dramatic reduction in teenagers obtaining driver's licenses. With their smart phones and apps they don't need cars to find companionship and to hook up.
24. In the US colleges and universities, not-for-profit and for-profit, are everywhere, sometimes, next to or across from each other. Not so in these countries. Only state (national) run universities get signage. And there is no evidence of a sector like our community colleges.
25. I saw no "manufactured" housing (mobile homes), not one trailer; and churches are relatively rare. I could not avoid speculating on the relationship between secularism and standards of living. Most obvious are the grossly obvious extreme differences in wealth that are so visible in the US.
26. Both countries are approaching zero tolerance for the consumption of any alcoholic beverages; hence there are unbelievable queues of taxis standing outside popular nightspots. Laws do influence behavioral choices.
27. We observed people smoking marijuana in New Zealand cities but all seemed very peaceful.
28. Brisbane is the only world city I have every visited where there is a "family" beach, right in the center of the city, and where also women bathers quite freely shed their tops.
29. The evidence of American companies ("job creators") is everywhere. And to get there we flew on an Australian flag carrier, Virgin Australian, in a plane made in Seattle. With service far superior to that we are accustomed to on US flag carriers.
30. The climate in both countries is an incredible draw for people all over the world to visit and resettle, particularly in Australia where immigration is not as restricted. And by climate I don't only mean the weather.
31. There is huge interest in what is happening in America. Everybody knows what our significance is.
32. I have never before thought about what it might be like to live in an "anti-nuclear" country, New Zealand as case in point. And I am referring not only to the generation of electrical power. And these people are really serious about the importance of world peace. There are many more tangible reminders than I would see in my country in town squares and in churches of the terrible loss of human life in the two "great wars", particularly World War I. Our respect for the "Greatest Generation" has not had the comparable impact on us of making us averse to engaging in foreign conflicts.
33. Both countries have ethnic minorities. But they were never subjected to de jure slavery, and then levels of de facto discrimination post Emancipation. This is hugely important for understanding the differences between these three countries.
34. All three countries are former British colonies, but ones that have made very different choices since leaving the "Empire." Two left the Empire, voluntarily; one by "revolution."
35. When in Australia the press was full of a report on world "prestige" reputational rankings of higher education institutions. Only two Australian universities made the top 100. We fared much, much better. In fact, we dominated overwhelmingly, as we do in so many other respects.
36. The "arts" and all that that means and implies, are extremely important to New Zealanders. While in country we enjoyed three days worth of a two-week plus long New Zealand International Festival of the Arts, hosted every other year in Wellington. It was a cultural smorgasbord, the likes of which reminded us of our own US Spoleto Festival, hosted every year for two and a half weeks in my beloved "holy city" (as they say in South Carolina), Charleston. I would recommend to my readers either and both of these festivals.
37. When I was a dad of two college students I really was a good dad in terms of providing them opportunities. As an illustration, my younger son who attended Elon University, had the opportunity and took it, for study abroad experiences (what we now call "HIP's", High Impact Practices), in Australia, Spain, and Costa Rica (and the Republican National Convention of 1996—truly another country from his home of origin!). When he went to Australia for nearly a month I engaged in some "what if" thinking and wondered if he met some young Australian woman and fell in love with her and the national culture and lifestyle, would he return? He did return. Based on what I saw of Brisbane I am somewhat surprised he did. But then he later went to Spain and loved that as much or more.
38. It's a good idea to get outside our country every now and then to see what kind of world our students are entering. I can rarely reduce anything complex to two words, but I can in this case. For our students and the opportunities they can have, the world is: 1) interconnected, and 2) diverse.
39. Visiting both countries reminded me of how important it is for our own citizens to obtain what my profession offers: a greater opportunity to function successfully in this kind of world. The students I saw and met in both New Zealand and Australia benefit from public policies that make higher education more affordable for them than my students in the US.

40. But there is a big difference between the challenges of providing THE TWO BIG "H'S": HIGHER EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE, to nations of four plus million and twenty-four plus million, respectively, versus our 330,000,000.
41. Traveling with a smart college graduate sure makes for more interesting conversation about what we are observing and experiencing—one more personal benefit of the positive impact of the college experience.
42. With almost every New Zealander and Australian we spoke I was reminded that they believe, as do I: that there is no place like home.
43. The last time Betsy and I visited New Zealand was three years ago exactly. We focused entirely on the South Island where we spent 2 weeks. This time we focused exclusively on the North Island, also for two weeks. On our first visit, we left Christ Church about 9.00 AM on February 21, 2011 and three hours and forty minutes later a terrible earthquake struck and destroyed much of Christ Church. This year we considered ourselves to be equally fortunate and most thankful no national disaster struck either country, coincidentally, after our departure.

I will remember and continue to think about what I learned in New Zealand and Australia for a long time and also continue to apply it to my work as a higher educator.

You Just Never Know What Students Will Remember...and Act On

4-9-14

I am at the point in life where I am asking “now what did I accomplish in my career for my own students?” This is sometimes hard for us to measure. And this is because students often don’t give us direct feedback. And because they often don’t know at the actual time they are with us, just what is the value of what they have received from us. As I have found out on multiple occasions, it isn’t until much later that students have a kind of delayed epiphany upon reflection on something I told them or did with or for them—and then they put that into meaningful perspective and action. Case in point to follow:

My younger son is a medical laser expert—he sells medical laser equipment leases to physicians and shows them how to operate the equipment and does much of the technical laser work for the physicians himself. And this guy is a classic liberal arts graduate with no medical formal “training” or education at all. He was a political science major at Elon University. But, those liberal arts grads really know how to learn whatever they need to do to advance through their careers and lives.

My son lives 175 miles from my home in Brevard, North Carolina, down in central South Carolina, where I spent 32 years of my life. And he and I talk every week by phone at least. Recently he was telling me about a 40’ish woman he treated. And they talked in search of some commonalities and came across their mutual interest in the University of South Carolina. My son learned that she had been a student there, a graduate, in the late 70’s.

And the conversation turned to something my son asked her about because he knew I directed the University 101 first-year seminar during the period when this woman was a student at USC. He asked this woman if she had taken the course and she related that she had indeed. And more than just taken the course—she related how she remembered she had a professor who became really disgusted with her whole class. Told them they were a bunch of losers, didn’t belong in college, and that he didn’t want to ever see any of them again—and that they didn’t have to come to this class again and he would just turn in a passing grade for all of them. And he meant it. This was back in the days when the course was graded pass/fail and all he had to do was turn in a “pass” grade. He did not return to this class.

This former student continued that a few weeks later she was contacted by “the University” and told that the class would be resuming and that she should return. The class did resume and was taught by another professor, whose name she did not remember, but something he taught her she remembered well and was still practicing in her third decade later.

What she remembered was a homily this professor had given the students at the end of the semester. He described it as his annual Christmas sermon. He described the late December period as being a highly emotional and irrational period in the American culture—one when many people made major life decisions—like to marry, divorce, kill somebody, quit something, start something, including, not returning to college after a disastrous first semester, just like this professor had experienced himself in college. Apparently he urged the students NOT to make any major life decisions during this period and to guard against the irrational pressures of the period. She told my son that she has practiced this in her own adult life and urged her own children and others to do

the same.

As my son related this to me, he asked me if I recalled this incident of a professor getting so mad at his first-year students that he chastised them all and told them to get lost and unofficially canceled the class. I told him that I did indeed. And that I remembered that I discovered this because one of the students in the class had reported to a Baptist chaplain whom she/he was seeing for counseling what this professor had said the students and how upset and disappointed

My Worst Fears

4-17-14

There are so many challenges that our students face in coming to college at all, making a successful transition into college, and then being able to find the way(s) to keep paying for it, both during and after college. So to help them we all want to have as many people as possible on our front lines who really know what to do to help more students become successful.

Some of us get it. Others don't. I love the ones who do. And I fear the harm from the ones who don't.

I have written before of the insatiable search for the magic bullet of retention. The lust for a panacea. The quest for the Holy Grail of Retention.

And I have come to the conclusion that I have been at this work long enough now to see that that quest is increasingly based on the assumption that technology will show us the way, how to retain more students. There is such a long history of technology changing America and of our love affair with "things."

My favorite American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in the late 1840's "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind."

I have believed that increasingly many of my fellow student success higher educators were looking for the ultimate savior for retention to exist in technology based solutions, but I had never before had one actually admit this to me.

It happened this last weekend. My non-profit organization had a booth at the Annual Meeting of the Higher Learning Commission. And I spent a good bit of time in that booth, time I really enjoy. I have reunions with partners in crime spanning decades. And I meet new people. And I get ideas from people and insights into what they are looking for.

So up comes this guy to the booth, introduces himself, and tells me that his campus senior leadership sent him to this meeting with the specific charge "to find some technology that we can buy to improve our retention." This was confirmation of my worst fears. There really are people in my profession like this who just don't get it. And so I did an unwise thing. I tried to give him a primer on how to improve student retention. And it didn't conclude technology as a panacea.

I started by explaining that what mattered much more was what he did—or didn't do. And, of course, I indicated it just wasn't what he did, but all the other educators on campus who relate to students. By my standards, my primer for him was succinct but specific. But he didn't get it. He couldn't/wouldn't consider any other way to look at this other than through a technology based solution which surely must exist.

I am really scared now. I have colleagues in the profession who really do think this way. No wonder corporate America is pushing on the academy all these technology based solutions. They already knew my colleagues think this way. And many educators think this way precisely because these solutions are being marketed to them. Makes me wonder how these educators got through college without mastering critical thinking....? My worst fears have been confirmed. But I have long known that we Americans like simple solutions to complex problems. I have to find a way to simplify my primer on how

to enhance student retention. Maybe then a few more people will believe me and won't be looking for the Holy Grail of Retention in technology.

It's That Time of Year

5-5-14

It's that time of year: end of term, before summer hiatus and commencement. And I am thinking about the kinds of things I used to say to my students as a parting message. And I hope you are thinking about what you could and should say to your students. It has been my experience that more of this messaging sinks in than we are aware of at the time we deliver it.

I am delivering a commencement address next week. It is one of the most difficult I have ever tried to plan for because I know that if I am not finished in exactly ten minutes a giant ejector hook is going to come out and remove me from the platform. My hosts and I know each other very well and they really mean it when they say ten minutes is all you've got. This is a way this campus respects its students and protects them (The University of South Carolina-Sumter). It wants them to leave the institution with a positive taste in their mouths, which a long-winded speaker could reduce the possibility of.

I have recommended to my readers before to try out as a mental exercise at least raising the question of what would you have to say if you could deliver the commencement address to your students this year? You can. There are many different contexts for end-of-term commencement. What are the most important thoughts you would like your students to carry with them as they finish the term and go off for four months or so?

Ideally, we wouldn't be thinking about students going off for the summer. This is because as some southern Protestants have long said, the summer is a time for "backsliding", in our context a kind of falling off the academic wagon and resuming bad habits acquired pre-college. And this is in the face of evidence from the US Department of Education, now more than ten years old, from the research of former USDOE researcher Clifford Adelman, which documents the higher degree attainment rates for students who have had ANY credits earned in summer school than for students who haven't. There is something powerful to be said for keeping the students in the groove, in the fold, not letting them get out of our good habits!

The fact that students leave us for the summer is explained by many factors, including tradition—an agrarian tradition of families needing their grown children home again to help plant or bring in the harvest. Another factor is the students' need for employment to help pay for college. And many students just want the break, even though if they kept on going they could get into the workforce sooner, and begin a year or so sooner to pay off their student loan debt and have acquired less of it in the first place than if they had gone straight through.

So what would you talk about? Well for starters you could give them advice on how to stay connected to their institution and their own higher education process during the summer? You could encourage them to consider coming to summer school. Getting an internship. Getting a job on campus. Participating in an educational travel experience.

And what am I going to say to these students?

I am going to reflect on how when I came to this community where I am delivering the address 47 years ago, I had a superior officer in the US Air Force "order" me to perform community service. I would urge the graduates not to let anyone dear to them have to wait until they were nearly 23 years old before having somebody say to them for the first time that they had an obligation to perform service.

I would use the occasion to discuss how fate (the Vietnam War) had placed me in a situation I didn't want to be in (on active duty in the military) but that I resolved to be what we call now a "survivor personality" and make the most of it. So what could our students "make the most of" this summer and later on too.

I would use the occasion to reflect on how this community has changed from de jure segregation to a more integrated society with more opportunity for all. I would use this as an illustration of how in this era when one political party never misses an opportunity to trash governmental action, that some of our most important changes and new opportunities as a country have been created by governmental action (in this case the Civil Rights Act).

This is to encourage you then to deliver your own thoughtful and unique commencement address to your students.

And this year, I am having another unique experience, a different type of commencement ritual, a wedding. My wife and I are presiding at a secular wedding ceremony where we will legally marry a couple including the delivery of a "commencement" homily. Rituals matter. They are what bind us together and make us into community.

Your commencement address needs to invite your students to return to your community, and if possible, not fully leave it this summer.

“Back at You”

6-7-14

I have a dear colleague who uses the phrase “back at you” or “I’ll be back at you” all the time. I have come to understand it is an informal expression of good bye with someone whom you interact with frequently and the message is that the recipient should expect to hear from or see the sender relatively soon. In the context of this blog then what I am trying to communicate is that after a brief hiatus I am “back at you”!

When I look back at my history of blog postings I see that it would appear that I have taken a summer vacation in that my most recent posting was May 5, 2014, about a month ago. None of my readers though have communicated that they missed my thoughts! Should I carry on anyway? I have decided to do so.

Most of the elapsed time has not been spent in vacation. A blog is a real commitment. And I have tried to make it such. I do have other commitments that I must put in place first and those have gotten in the way. I regret that, mostly. I did have a partial week of vacation at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C. and I do not regret that. If you haven’t visited what many South Carolinians refer to as their “Holy City” you should. Its historic preservation is outstanding and it is a foodie’s paradise. And for the arts aficionado there are few festivals to surpass the Spoleto Festival, a three decades plus esteemed imitation/replication of the longer festival of the same name in Spoleto, Italy. The US version is 17 days, late May early June every year, of plays, art, opera, jazz, classical orchestral, dance, you name it. The city fills with tourists from all over the country and even The New York Times covers the Festival.

Reading the local press has to be a shock for visitors from blue states. This week there was coverage of local political candidates who were trying to prove they were the more conservative Republican. And what really took the cake was another flag dispute, this time over a Confederate naval battle flag that has been discovered displayed in The Citadel chapel. The Citadel is a state supported, co-ed, military college. The administration is refusing to remove the flag and a Charleston Democratic City Council member is threatening to cut a \$950,000 annual appropriation to the college. And a prominent member of the South Carolina General Assembly is about to become the new President of the public College of Charleston, a politician with impeccable conservative creds, a history of running a business selling Confederate memorabilia to tourists, and no higher education leadership history. The faculty have, courageously, voted no confidence. But so what? There will be no rescinding this presidential appointment. Anyone who says that faculty don’t need tenure in red states just doesn’t understand the threats to academic freedom. But I don’t care. I love South Carolina anyway. It was so good to me and I it. And I fit in just fine in spite of my liberal values.

When I last wrote it was about the end of the academic term and what we could be saying to our students. I had to put that into practice in a commencement address I delivered on May 7. I also delivered another kind of “commencement” address, also a homily that I delivered in a wedding ceremony that my wife and I officiated in, also in South Carolina. Marrying people is really fun. We might even want to do this again. And it is truly a commencement! It is also a cause and occasion for reflection on the meaning of our lives and for making new commitments and renewing long standing ones.

As I look towards the rest of my summer, the next thing I have on my professional plate is a first visit for my wife and I to the small but extremely geopolitically important Middle Eastern nation of Qatar to which I am en route as I write this posting. Qatar has one nationally funded university, Qatar University, which like most universities admits first-year students. And they face many of our challenges in terms of under preparation and under motivation of our students, particularly males. The University respects US higher education and is seeking regional accreditation with the US Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Qatar University has been participating all year in my non-profit organization’s Foundations of Excellence, a self-study and planning process to produce an action plan for improvement, when once executed to a high degree significantly improves retention. The University’s work in our process has been some of the very best I have seen across our 256 institutions. It has been a privilege to advise them in this process. I am sure this visit will lead to at least a subsequent posting.

Other highlights of my summer will be:

1. Finishing the recruitment and selection process for the 2014-15 cohort of Foundations of Excellence colleges and universities. Our application deadline is July 15.

2. Finishing the recruitment and selection process for our second national cohort for Gateways to Completion, (G2C), our process for improving student performance in high failure rate/high enrollment courses. Our application deadline is August 1.
3. Finishing the recruitment and selection process for our newest initiative, RPM, Retention Performance Management. This was designed by us especially to serve smaller and private institutions that had not previously worked with us; but we are finding response very strong also from our larger public institutional colleagues. Our application deadline is August 15.
4. Continuing and completing the design for both G2C and RPM, both works in progress.
5. Attending the annual summer Academic Affairs meeting of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, a very close collaborating partner for our Institute.
6. Attending seven weeks of wonderful, classical music concerts in our adopted home town of Brevard, N.C. This is the location for the 77 year old Brevard Music Center and Summer Festival. The concerts provided by three different resident orchestras and guest artists are held outdoors in a covered theater that seats 1800 on a bucolic 180 acre campus.
7. Planning and hosting a joint birthday party for my wife and me, coupled with a "retirement" celebration for her. Betsy Barefoot is the founding mother/co-founder with me of the non-profit John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. She is retiring from her administrative duties from the Institute but will remain engaged with us from her position of Senior Scholar. She will also continue her work as an independent scholar, writer, editor, and speaker. I do not plan to follow her into retirement.
8. Enjoying the wonderful summer climate of the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, where we moved to escape the blazing heat and humidity of central South Carolina.

I promise I will write and post pieces on this blog periodically in addition to the above activities. And I would welcome your response(s).

How Would You Handle This Student Success Challenge?

6-12-14

Most of my colleagues who work in what is now called the “student success” field are well familiar with the challenges of trying to improve college student performance for recent high school graduates who are: 1) underprepared for college; 2) unmotivated (or so we think—at least towards academic work); 3) lacking in vocational purpose and direction; 4) immature; 5) economically disadvantaged; and 6) disproportionately male.

But what if you worked in a country where all of those factors were identical except the students’ socio economic status. Let’s say instead of being low or lower SES, they were of high SES, highly advantaged financially. They have no worries about financing college. It is free to all citizens of this country, totally free and depending where you are enrolled may also provide a stipend. And because you are high SES you already have a post college job promised that will assure you financial security for a lifetime.

In this country there are highly motivated and successful students, especially in disciplines like engineering, business, law (where law is an undergraduate major), and pharmacy. And they exist side by side with students who are identical in all respects except they are unmotivated towards their presence in university and its requirements. These students, most notably men, are described as having an overriding interest in very fast and expensive cars, which they already own. And the cost of fueling these machines is negligible.

This country is small. It has several highly valuable natural resources, which much of the rest of the world wants, needs, and purchases. There are only approximately 300,000 citizens in this country who have all the privileges, advantages and powers that a nation state can convey on its citizens. In this case those advantages include free education anywhere in the world, housing, utilities and other subsidies.

Approximately 1,700,000 people from all over the world come to this country for employment to perform the needed skills and labor that either the citizens are not professional able to provide or do not wish to provide.

There is only one public university in this country. There is also a military institution funded by the government to prepare only men for service in the army. And this country is opening next year a college for those men who wish to become police officers. And a Texas community college (Houston Community College) operates the one community college in this country.

This fascinating, extremely important geopolitically, wealthy country is Qatar. It has the highest per capita wealth in the world. It has a construction boom unequaled in the developed world.

I have just visited there, with my wife, Dr. Betsy Barefoot, as part of my role as what my non-profit organization calls an “Institute Advisor” for Qatar University, which is a participant in our Foundations of Excellence process (FoE). FoE is a voluntary, comprehensive, institution-wide, self study of everything the institution does for its students in their first year. The goals of the FoE process are to: 1) produce an action plan to improve first-year student learning and retention; 2) execute that plan. Qatar University has done an outstanding job on developing such a plan and is now moving into the phases of executing that plan.

While I was on the campus I was asked repeatedly what I would do if I were there full time and charged with trying to address this problem of lack of motivation of Qatari male citizens. When I was asked this I first turned the question around on my questioner to find out what they were attempting to do; and then I would offer suggestions.

What Can Be Done Over the Summer to Improve Next Year's Retention Rate?

6-11-14

I am sure most lay people view college and university summer periods as a time of more relaxed pace, with many of the students and faculty away. And there is some truth in this of course. But for campuses trying to increase student success of the incoming class this is an important period to get in place more effective structures to welcoming and assimilating new students, who will arrive at the end of the summer.

Recently I visited a baccalaureate level, residential college, that is anticipating a reduction in its retention rate from this past fall returning for this fall term. The reasons for this are complex but I am sorry to note have largely to do with student athlete retention. But that's another story.

Not wanting to repeat next year what happened this year I offered the following strategies/activities to the President's cabinet as options for an improvement in the coming year's retention rate. I offered these suggestions in early May when the institution had time to implement many of them. The more important factors though were, would they have the energy, knowledge and will to carry these out?

1. Launch a Summer Bridge program, open to all, required of some. Provide scholarships for some; fee basis for others. There are plenty of middle class families who would pay a modest amount to give their student a jumpstart on college success.
2. Examine the process for assigning first-year students their roommates. What are the criteria? What might predict for supportive relationship success?
3. Take steps to increase academic support attention within residence halls to be available fall term, coupled with an early alert process that triggers intervention by residence hall personnel.
4. Offer some type of "transition year program" for high(er) risk students to be admitted for fall—required cohort classes and other forms of support, particularly residential learning communities.
5. Assign high(er) risk students to special cadre of advisors
6. Revamp Orientation based on what has been most successful in prior years, particularly including more roles for peer leaders.
7. Introduce leadership education activities for high(er) risk students to increase their engagement
8. Rethink custodial staffing patterns in first-year halls to prevent conditions from deteriorating and thus encouraging even more deplorable living conditions
9. Offer special "academic" orientation for athletes, not run by the Athletic Department. Make sure that athletic practice commitments do not interfere with student athlete social and academic assimilation into the institution during period prior to start of classes.
10. Conduct a cost/benefit analysis for all sports' programs and target some for special intervention
11. Create satellite academic support unit in high traffic athlete space (but of course open to all students)
12. Make a concerted effort to get faculty to administer some kind of graded measurement in first two weeks and link results to Early Warning system and referrals to academic support center.
13. Perform an analysis of utilization patterns of academic support center by academic areas so as to ramp up utilization by lower utilizing units
14. Increase tutoring staffing levels for academic support center
15. Offer more learning communities in residence halls so that all first-year students have this opportunity.
16. Target "Exploratory" (undecided) students for early career planning intervention in fall term
17. Appoint a cabinet level Czar/Czarina for the First Year/Student Success who will therefore be present in cabinet level discussions for input on to decisions that may affect student success outcomes.
18. Adjust web site to make more First-Year student friendly
19. Increase late decider transfer student recruitment?
20. Increased attention to Orientation for transfer students
21. Examine impact of fall rush on Greek student organization student success and adjust accordingly (defer for some students?)
22. Make key part of faculty orientation at start of term what they can do this fall to support greater first-year success efforts?
23. Develop process to increase faculty monitoring of attendance in First-Year classes and to report absences through Early Alert.
24. Offer a series of "Convocations" throughout the first year.

25. Combine offering of "Convocations" with establishment of a "common hour" during which no regular class meetings to be held
26. Increase attention paid to families through such mechanisms as: Family Council, Family Weekend, Siblings' Weekend, Parents' Newsletter/website, etc.
27. Assess high enrollment and high DWFI rate course patterns and target especially high failure rate courses
28. Commit to increased efforts to increase recruiting of Honors students and therefore to a program that would be distinctive and would enable Honors students to have impact on non-Honors population.

And I had other suggestions that would only be germane to this one particular institution.

29. So, my readers, what you are you doing this summer to boost the success rate of next year's entering cohort? What suggestions are you making to your own decision makers?

Inspirations in a Concert

6-30-14

Many of us who are trying to increase student success are constantly thinking about what we could do to increase student motivation. I found myself reflecting once again on that during concerts I have attended during the past several weeks. I know, many of you readers go to concerts, in part, not to think about work. But I have to take my inspirations where I get them.

The context for these thoughtful occasions are the concerts of the Brevard Music Center, in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, where I happen to have the good fortune to live with my wife, Betsy Barefoot. We were drawn to move to Brevard from South Carolina especially by the prospect of being able to sit outside on cool summer evenings listening to classical music under a covered roof with 1800 seats. This is something we could not do during my 30+ years in central South Carolina where sitting outdoors at night is the equivalent of a sauna experience replete with profuse perspiration. The Brevard Music Center and Festival is a 78 year-old non-profit educational and performance institution. It has a 180 acre residential campus where for seven weeks every summer 65 resident faculty and 420 students, aged 13-30, are also in residence for individual instruction and performance opportunities, along with an overall ambience and framework for life changing experiences. In addition to being an ideal setting for the enjoyment of classical music as a patron, it is also an ideal setting for peaceful reflection. There are concerts every day of the week, and ticketed events on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons.

The opening concert this year featured world famous violinist, Itzhak Perlman and it was his performance I wished our students could have seen and heard. Mr. Perlman is 68 years old and is living in every step he takes, literally, with the effects of polio that he contracted at age 4. I found myself not only mesmerized by his rendering of the music, and his informal banter with the conductor, Keith Lockhart (also conductor of the Boston Pops), but with his initial entrance onto the stage. Maestro Perlman walks seemingly with enormous personal effort using two metal crutches attached to his arms and wearing leg braces, and somehow hoists himself onto a raised dais, unassisted, with the audience literally holding their collective breath following his every movement prior to the movement we thought we came to see and hear. After watching him making this tremendous exertion, followed by what I know was not effortless, but appeared to be his relatively effortless musical performance, we then watched with riveted attention his strenuous effort to propel himself down off the dais and off the stage swinging his braced legs in wide circular arcs. I felt drained and in awe after this total performance. And I immediately said to my wife that the next time I thought about quitting something I was doing because it was too difficult, I would remember Mr. Perlman and not give up. And that was the message I wished we could impart to our under motivated college students.

Who do we have on our campuses that we can expose students to for attention- getting, reflection, inspiration and motivation?

Fifty years of good research suggests that the greatest influence on students is the influence of other students. So how do we select students who could inspire other students and put them into positions of authority to motivate other students? There are many ways to do this of course, and we know how to do this and this is being done at many of our institutions. Now more of us just have to get on with it and be more intentional about it.

And we higher educators can inspire and motivate our students as well. The Brevard Music Center has reminded me of this as well.

Salute to a Special Colleague in Transition: Is She or Isn't She Retiring?

7-1-14

While this blog is one hosted by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, my Institute colleagues have, by default, largely allowed me to be the primary, if not quite the sole, contributor. So I guess that gives me some sort of personal editorial privilege. I am taking this now to offer a posting about the "retirement" of a special colleague, the co-founder of our non-profit organization, Betsy O. Barefoot. Disclaimer: Betsy and I are also related by way of marriage.

As noted above, Betsy is the Co-Founder of our Institute. She and I had the good fortune to find a 501c3 non-profit organization (Brevard College) to be the fiscal agent for a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, which enabled Betsy and me to start a new higher education organization in 1999. We moved to western North Carolina to launch this new venture, originally established as the Policy Center on the First Year of College, as the state of South Carolina's strict nepotism policies would have prevented Betsy and I from both working together as we had since 1988 at the University of South Carolina, and to be legally married to one another, with one of us being in a reporting relationship to the other. This was the catalyst then for my early retirement from my beloved USC. In 2007 we reorganized the legal status of our organization and renamed it with its current name, as an independent 501c3 organization.

There is one most important question I want to address here: Is Betsy Barefoot really retiring?

Well, yes, and no. All depends on how we define "retirement."

If we mean by "retirement" she would be giving up all of her work in the student success movement, absolutely not?

But she has retired, effective June 30, from her position of Vice President of the Institute. She will continue, however, in her role as the Institute's Senior Scholar working occasionally in a less structured way with selected Institute initiatives. She will also continue serving as the Co-Editor, with Dr. Jillian Kinzie of Indiana University's Center for Post Secondary Education, for the Jossey-Bass Publishers' New Directions in Higher Education series. And she will actually pursue an increased set of her independent research activities, which her previous administrative duties in the Institute precluded. She will also remain an active speaker and advisor to the higher education community. And Betsy and I will continue to do a number of consulting projects as we have for several decades. Finally, Betsy and I will continue to author a series of textbooks for Bedford/St. Martins of Macmillan Higher Education.

I can't imagine having created this Institute (www.jngi.org) without her. Together we have assisted, supported, advised, literally hundreds of two and four-year institutions in the US and abroad over the past fifteen years. Our work did not duplicate the work we had done together previously from 1988-1999 at the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Instead, our work in the Institute has gone in new directions that complemented our foundational work at the University of South Carolina. At USC Betsy was the co-founder with another bright graduate of Duke University, Dr. Dorothy Fidler, of the Center's prolific publishing activities. Thanks to these two women a vast scholarly literature base was created and disseminated to provide much of the intellectual underpinning for what is now called the student success movement. I had been affiliated with USC for much longer, since 1967, but didn't know Betsy until she serendipitously was appointed as a graduate assistant in our Center in 1988 while finishing her doctorate at William and Mary.

During this period of our work together based in North Carolina, she has also been by far our most productive scholar with an impressive array of contributions to the scholarly literature that is now part of the larger student success intellectual foundation. Betsy's combination of skills in public presentation/speaking, writing, editing, researching, analyzing, evaluating, advising, consulting, planning, were unique in our organization. Her interpersonal skills made her a joy for all of us to work with. Her judgment came to be depended on by all of us. Although I was and am the titular head of the organization, the reality was that many times in our staff meeting group processes, all of us would look to her for closure on reaching a final direction for what might be the best course of action. Betsy is/was trusted by all her professional partners, internal and external to our organization, for delivering for them on her insightful counsel, respectfully and wisely rendered. On many occasions, we would be asked: "Well, what is Betsy Barefoot's take?"

Betsy and I are both especially thankful to our esteemed colleague and mentor, Russ Edgerton, the former President of the American Association for Higher Education and senior higher education program officer for The Pew Charitable Trusts, for his initial vision for this new organization which he wanted to see us found. That vision led to the creation of our organization, which has been subsequently funded and supported by four other foundations: The Atlantic Philanthropies; Lumina Foundation for Education; the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation; and USA Funds; and supported also by hundreds of colleges and universities.

After fifteen years of a highly structured professional life, Betsy has reached the point where she wants much less structure, and far more freedom. I am fond of telling people that Betsy's mother, whom I never met, is quoted as having told many that when Betsy was a very little girl she had a favorite prayer: "Lord help me to do what I want to do"! Well, now finally she gets to do just that. Betsy is ready to live without staff meetings of any duration (and ours are usually long!). Personally, I love staff meetings, especially ours, and can't imagine a fulfilling life without them. She is ready to live without most recurring and long-term professional commitments. And she wants to make way for younger and newer people in our organization. She has a phrase that says it all: "It's time."

Betsy and I plan to continue enjoying our lives together in a beautiful setting in our Blue Ridge Mountains, which surround our 21 acre mountain top home. For Betsy this has been a return to her native North Carolina. Her roots for the pursuit of educational excellence were shaped in her hometown of Goldsboro, where like her fourteen year older only sibling, a sister, Betsy was high school valedictorian. Betsy has been kidded by many for marrying down with me as a partner, as I was far from ever being a valedictorian at any level of formal education. But our work together in the Institute has been a great fit of abilities, values, and vision. And this work will continue after Betsy's retirement based on the exceptionally strong foundation she has left us.

And what about my plans? Well, I don't have any for retirement and plan to keep on keeping on. Readers may continue to communicate with Betsy as before, at barefoot@inqi.org.

Reducing Failure Rates in Gateway Courses: All Aspirational Goals for Improving Student Success Depend on This!

7-17-14

I have written before about this, but like the other most important things in life and career, some things can't be said too often. I am referring to the deplorable and unacceptable failure rates in gateway courses. These courses are inflicting so many casualties in terms of dashed student hopes and dreams, student attrition, defaults on student loans, and overall declining performance as a national higher education system, that this issue must be taken more seriously.

In my four decades plus career I have been a relentless champion for institutions taking more seriously what I have been calling "the first-year experience." And institutions, thousands of them, have responded by making the first year a much higher priority. As testimony to these efforts, retention/attrition rates have remained relatively flat, which considering the changing characteristics of today's college students, whom we would expect to be persisting at lower levels, is quite remarkable.

From my vantage point though, the majority of our efforts have been nibbling around the edges of student success. Disproportionately we have been focusing on the elements of the first year more easily subject to modification and improvement, especially those less under the direct control of faculty: orientation, placement, advisement registration, counseling, residence life, career planning, student activities, academic/learning support, etc. We have also made many inroads in more academically focused initiatives particular in such interventions as first-year seminars, learning communities, Supplemental Instruction and other High Impact Practices. But for a myriad of reasons, we have been more reluctant to venture into what I have come recently to call "the *real* first-year experience", gateway courses. I will suggest in a later posting what are some of the reasons for this reluctance to "go there." But for this posting I want to share some illustrations of the extent of the problem and therefore why we must go there.

What I am going to share is drawn from a national pilot project organized by the non-profit organization of which I am a part, the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. This project is designated as "G2C, Gateways to Completion." For the academic year 2013-14 we have had 13 post-secondary institutions begin this three-year pilot. I will also write more in a subsequent blog about the components of this project. My colleague, Dr. Drew Koch, the Executive Vice President of the Institute, heads our work. Our thirteen pilot institutions include three community colleges, three research universities, five regional comprehensive public colleges and universities, and two FOR-profit, largely or totally on line institutions.

One of the many components of the G2C process is the use of a very sophisticated software platform that enables participating institutions to much better understand the scope of the gateway course success challenges, and to then make better informed, data driven decisions about which courses most need our attention and intervention. To illustrate the scope of this academic underperformance, the extent of societal unfairness involved, and the longer-term impact of gateway course performance on subsequent educational and human outcomes I will present the following data that Dr. Koch has compiled from our G2C work to date:

- 1) Examples of Average DFWI Rates for G2C Institutions
- 2) Examples of DFWI Rates for Selected G2C Institutions Subpopulations
- 3) DFWI Rate Examples Correlated with Retention Outcomes for Various G2C Institutions

Table 1. Examples of Average DFWI Rates for G2C Institutions

This table provides data for the courses that two or more G2C institutions selected to work on as part of the G2C process. Column A shows the courses that G2C institutions selected after completing their analysis of data in the G2C gateway course analytics platform. Column B. shows the number of institutions working on this course as

part of G2C, and Column C shows the average DFWI rate for the G2C institutions that chose to work on the course. For example, Accounting (the first courses in Column A) is being considered by 2 G2C institutions (see Column B) with an average DFWI rate of 43.4% across the institutions working on the course (see Column C).

Column A. Course	Column B. Number of Institutions Working on Course	Column C. Average DFWI Rate for All Students
Accounting	2	43.4%
Biology	8	30.8%
Chemistry	4	31.9%
English – College Level	6	30.3%
History	6	30.3%
Math – College Level	10	35.3%
Math – Developmental	3	49.4%
Psychology	5	30.0%

Table 2. Examples of DFWI Rates for Selected G2C Institutions' Subpopulations

This table shows some examples of DFWI rates for various demographic subpopulations for the same courses shown in Table 1. It merits pointing out that the G2C software platform allows institutions to see DFWI rate outcomes for many different subpopulations – not just the ones shown here on Table 2. The ability to see breakouts of DFWI rates for subpopulations allows institutions to dig deeper into what is going on in each course. For example, for Accounting (Column A), African American, Hispanic / Latino, and First Generation Students (Column B) respectively have DFWI rates in the course of 62.0, 69.5, and 48.2% (Column C).

Column A. Course	Column B. Subpopulation	Column C. Average DFWI Rate for Subpopulation
Accounting	African American	62.0%
	Hispanic / Latino	69.5%
	First Generation	48.2%
Biology	African American	48.0%
	Pell Eligible	38.0%
Chemistry	Hispanic / Latino	45.0%
	Native American	79.2%
English – College Level	African American	43.2%
	Native American	40.8%
History	African American	49.0%
	Pell Eligible	38.2%
Math – College Level	African American	49.1%
	Native American	48.3%
	Pell Eligible	39.4%
Math – Developmental	African American	60.0%
	Native American	73.1%
Psychology	African American	44.5%
	Native American	52.1%

Table 3. DFWI Rate Examples Correlated with Retention Outcomes for Various G2C Institutions

This table provides several institution-specific examples of how rates of D, F, W and I grades correlate with attrition (lack of retention). We have removed institutional course numbers and modified course titles to protect institutional identities – but the data is accurate. For example, when looking at the first course on the table – Accounting I found in Column A below – one finds a DFWI rate of 54.0% (see Column B). This DFWI rate is the average rate for all students in the course at the institution – whether they were retained or not. In Column C, one sees that students who were not retained at the institution but who were eligible to return had an 81.6% DFWI rate in Accounting I. In other words, more than 4 out of 5 students who took Accounting I and who could have come back a year later but chose not to do so earned a D, F, W or I grade in Accounting I. Column D shows that **all** of the students who were dismissed from the institution for academic reasons who took Accounting I had a D, F, W or I grade in the course.

Column A. Course Examples from Individual G2C Institutions	Column B. Average DFWI Rate	Column C. DFWI Rate for Non- Retained Eligible-to- Return Students	Column D. DFWI Rate for Academic Dismissal Students
<i>Accounting I</i>	54.0%	81.6%	100%
<i>Foundations of Biology</i>	18.9%	55.0%	92.9%
<i>General Chemistry I</i>	36.3%	73.9%	82.4%
<i>Writing and Rhetoric I</i>	10.6%	25.8%	61.4%
<i>Survey of American History</i>	26.8%	67.2%	100%
<i>College Algebra</i>	59.7%	73.5%	89.6%
<i>Beginning Algebra (Remedial)</i>	24.4%	65.1%	100%
<i>Introduction to Psychology</i>	28.1%	46.1%	83.7%
Mean of Average Rates	32.4%	61.0%	88.8%

So, dear readers, my colleague Dr. Koch and I conclude the following from the above:

1. Clearly (and sadly), when it comes to success in gateway courses, race, socioeconomic standing, and first-generation status are among the greatest predictors of failure.
2. Simply stated, lack of success in gateway courses is directly correlated with substantially higher rates of attrition.
3. These findings suggest we are not paying nearly enough attention to the importance of gateway course performance rates.

I will be writing in the near future about why we tolerate these deplorable performance rates; about possible explanatory variables; and what our G2C, Gateways to Completion process is attempting to do about these challenges.

Why Don't We Make Gateway Course Student Performance A Higher

Priority: Restated as Why Are We So Tolerant of Such High Failure Rates?

7-21-14

Ever since I taught my first gateway course in 1967 I have experienced firsthand the high failure rates in such courses. Quite unobjectively, my retrospective perception of my performance in that era was that I was an effective college teacher. Eight years later I was the recipient of my university's highest award for outstanding teaching. But I still had unacceptable levels of student performance. It troubled me then. It troubles me even more now.

It is my observation and therefore belief that the great majority of so-called "student success" interventions developed over the past four decades address student issues experienced outside the classroom (advising, orientation, counseling, activities, career planning, etc). But I would argue that the real, common experience that matters most for all entering college students is what we offer them in the way of gateway courses. And, as I have written and argued previously, we are failing a very large number of our students in these courses. I am so disturbed by this pattern that I see it as an order of injustice that is analogous to the failure of our campuses to protect our female students from sexual assault, a tolerated war on women if you will---tolerated largely by men. I better not get going on that soapbox but with the recent revelations about stunning avoidance by campuses to seriously confront abuse of female students I do see an analogy with gateway courses in our tolerance for what clearly should be unacceptable student outcomes.

So why do we tolerate these high failure rates? Why haven't we done more to intervene and make this a priority? Some possible answers, hypotheses at least:

1. Many of us don't even think about this. It is not registering on our consciousness or consciences.
2. For those of us who do think about it we may be accepting this as a natural order of the academic universe. We have always had high failure rates and always will.
3. Some of us believe further that this is the way it should be, a kind of academic social Darwinism.
4. Because these high failure rates have always been with us we have concluded that there is nothing that can be done to alleviate these dismal rates of performance, short of drastically lowering academic standards.
5. Many of us involved in teaching these courses never even talk with our fellow colleagues who teach these courses about these courses. We don't believe these courses are important enough to honor them by sharing with colleagues about them.
6. Many of us dislike teaching these courses and, if we can, don't teach them at all and offload them to other teachers who are less powerful and established than we are.
7. We dislike these courses because they are an approach to our disciplines that is the opposite of the way we like to work in our disciplines: these courses are superficial and cursory treatments of the vast intellectual enterprise that represents our discipline's grand total of knowledge and accomplishment. Only in US higher education do we seem to cherish what we call the "survey" course which provide our students nothing in depth and which are largely forgotten a month after the term's end.
8. These courses bore us to distraction and hence create the same response in students.
9. And some of us do not like the students who enroll in these courses. They are not our majors. They are required to be there and most do not want to be there. They have poor attendance habits and their general indifference to our subject matter offends us.
10. For some of us as individual educators, and collectively at our institutional levels, high failure rates we believe are a measure of institutional quality and maintenance of high standards.
11. Most of us received this kind of intellectual hazing as beginning college students and feel it is our duty to pass along the tradition.
12. And why should we waste our precious time and energy to improve these courses as the faculty rewards system, which we must all live by, does not reward such efforts?
13. For those of us who might want to tackle this issue of poor performance in gateway courses it means having to deal with long, long traditions of the way these courses have been taught, in addition to what has been taught (but not learned). It also means having to tackle the established norms, cultures of academic departments, who believe they have far more important concerns than gateway courses.
14. It also means having to tackle very powerful people who set these norms: tenured full professors and academic department chairs. These people are very successful at resisting change they do not want and at punishing those who violate the informal and formal norms.
15. Some of us believe that the role of first-year instruction is to "sort", separate, weed out the unfit and filter out from the entering hordes those who do not really belong in our academic community. This is a duty which we dutifully perform.

16. We tolerate those abysmal performance rates because we do not feel responsible for them. If students are performing poorly it is because of something they did or didn't do, not because of something we did or didn't do.
17. We believe these students are failing because they are underprepared by a poorly performing K-12 system for which we do not accept responsibility even though our institutions educated the teachers in these systems.
18. Or we believe these students are performing poorly, or worse, deserve to be performing poorly, because they are lazy, irresponsible, immature, and don't belong here at this time in their lives. They belong instead in community colleges (or whatever might be an alternative to community colleges) and certainly not here.
19. We tolerate these levels of underperformance because on individual and institutional levels we have not yet accepted sufficiently responsibility for student success and we cling instead to a blame the victim model.

It is no wonder that many of us in the academy both don't want to tackle this issue and don't believe much can be done to address it, short of denying the students admission.

So why am I even attempting a capstone effort to improve gateway course performance? Because this is the last frontier of the student success movement. We have been moving in this direction for forty years. We can't put it off any longer. Everything else we have tried has only gotten us this far. We will never attain our national completion goals unless we confront as a high priority the rates of student performance in gateway courses. To do this we must no longer tolerate American higher education's best kept dirty little secret: our failure rates in gateway courses.

Fall Ahead 2014

9-2-14

No matter how long we academics have been at it, even for the most jaded of us (I do not include myself in that category), there is just nothing like the fall. We get “up” again. We are ready to go again. Our enthusiasm, openness, readiness to try new things peaks again.

We look forward to seeing colleagues who even three to four months ago we were sick of and couldn't wait to get away from. Some of us have returned from the summer hiatus. Some of us never left. We look forward to the exchange of “intelligence”, which some would call gossip.

We have come back curious to see what surprises “the Administration” has in store for us. We know that the administration always makes its big moves when the faculty and students are away! Each year the students look a little bit younger to us even though some of us lie and tell them they got older and we didn't.

The first-year students have returned and are delighted they are no longer first-year students anymore (for those that aren't). The reality is that many of them are not over the hump yet. They don't know why the Greeks meant “wise fools” by the term “sophomores.” “Experts” like me who have written about sophomores say that if only we can help them develop a sense of purpose during their second year we can significantly increase their probability of finishing their degrees.

And the first-year students arrive and there is just nothing like them. We eagerly await the official fall “count” day to see how our numbers came out. And we get another chance to do the things that will make more students successful, if only we have the will and the intentionality.

And for those of us who care to look and are able to notice, we will also be joined by transfer students whose route to a bachelors degree is now the normative one, being pursued by more than 60% of BA degree seeking students. Too bad they are so invisible, so neglected. One of these days they will achieved the status and the attention they deserve, like first-year students of 30 years go. I'm working on that.

We are so fortunate to be members of such an optimistic community that renews itself annually with a new burst of hope, optimism, and reaffirmation of our core purposes. Each fall we can again benchmark the progress of our lives and careers. Each fall we get to once again start anew. We can almost become a tabula rasa. What other professions grant such a privilege for regular renewal and even redemption?

Some of us return to join the excitement of the ritualized violence, sexism, commercialism, and exploitation (of the male football players and the female cheerleaders) we know as football. Not me. I don't worry at all about America converting its higher education system to on-line for profit providers. If we did that how could we produce the gladiators our civilization thrives upon? There are few things I am sure of but I am sure we are never going to give up our love affair with them. They are a metaphor for who we are, how we work, how we live.

And this fall in particular in the “student success” field, I predict community college enrollments again will be down, as the economy continues to generate more jobs, which many of our less well off students seek in lieu of going to college. The private college enrollment picture is probably going to be mixed. And in the public regional university sector, no matter what the enrollments, the academic economy will not have recovered, in contrast to the rest of the economy, due to the punishment public higher education is taking in the approximately 30 red states where the party in power is punishing higher education with draconian cuts. Bottom line overall: the economy is recovering; we are not.

In Memorium: John J. Duffy

9-4-14

On this Labor Day 2014 I received news that one of my most important mentors, John J. Duffy, passed away very early in the morning. John mercifully and finally came to rest after a long struggle with a terrible illness. I had last visited him over Thanksgiving 2013 when he was still able to have the kind of conversation that enabled me to tell him all that he had meant to me.

When I think of the reasons why I am thankful to have been in my profession of a higher educator and professor, one of my top reasons is the wonderful mentors I have had, most of them at the University of South Carolina, who have made me whatever it is that I am today. John J. Duffy was *primus inter pares* in that distinct group.

I first met John Duffy on Saturday, January 13, 1967. He was one of four senior University of South Carolina administrators who signed off on me to be an adjunct instructor for three of the University's "Regional Campuses" for the period 1967-68 when I was on active duty with the United States Air Force in South Carolina. My Air Force squadron commander had ordered me to come over to the University to have my credentials approved so I could perform what the Air Force defined as "community service", college teaching. It was that initial teaching experience that provided me an entrée to ultimate full-time employment, which I enjoyed from 1970-1999. During the period 1983-1996 I was John's Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and he was my Chancellor.

My first day on the job with him we had a wide ranging conversation that set the tone for the next 13 years. It was a period of profound influence on my development as a University of South Carolina leader and a leader beyond the confines of our campus.

So the first thing John said to me was: "John, do you know the difference between a Vice Chancellor and the Chancellor?" I told him I did not. His answer: "John, a Vice Chancellor is a mouse trying to act like a rat; and the Chancellor is a rat trying to stay out of the trap!" I concluded that one of my roles was to keep him out of the trap. In reality, he helped keep me out of the trap—or traps.

He also asked me a question that no one had asked me since my father had when I was 9 years old. I had a little black book in which I had written a "friends" list and an "enemies" list (not like that compiled by the Nixon White House!). His question: "John, who are your enemies?" My answer: "I have two John: 1) the football coach; 2) the University Librarian." And two long stories unfolded which told my boss much more about me than about the two characters I was describing.

On that first day on the job he also taught me this:

1. "John, we are going to get many choices and decisions to make in this office. And we will be regularly given the opportunity to choose what is best for our units, office, positions, versus the larger university. Much as I might wish they would always be one and the same, they will not. And we will always chose what's best for the University."
2. "John, as we make these decisions, we will always make those decisions as if we personally could live with the consequences of those decisions for the rest of our careers and lives at the University—and on the assumption that we will be spending the rest of our careers and lives at the University." And we did.
3. "John, every year we are going to have to make final decisions about the budgets for our five campuses. And we will sometimes be faced with tough cuts that we will have to make. And we will be offered proposals that will include a variety of options to take those cuts. Sometimes those options will include cutting money for student assistants and cutting money for libraries and books. John, there is no university without students so we never cut their jobs; and there can be no university without its libraries, we will never cut our libraries."

John Duffy gave me many gifts, including:

1. the freedom to make my job whatever I wanted to make of it. I chose as my areas of key emphasis those of faculty governance and faculty/staff development
2. the freedom to take on other duties of even broader service to the University and the country, which made possible my establishment of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition; our series of international conferences on The First-Year Experience; our prolific

series of publications and scholarship; our launching of work on the “senior year experience”; and the establishment of our University 401 course for seniors transitioning out of the University. With me, he walked his talk in allowing me to do what was best for the University, even though at times those works took time away from my duties for him.

3.

John taught me so much, including:

1. That while we always worked for the current President of the University, our real employer was the people of South Carolina; and we better never forget that our most important job was to do what was best for those people, no matter how often we thought we were smarter or better than those people.
2. That what was the key to his success was the quality of his judgment
3. And the fact that people trusted him. I learned what leaders do to gain the trust of others. For one thing, they keep their word.
4. The importance as academic leaders of spending a tremendous amount of time with our faculty, talking to them, listening to them, learning about their work, sponsoring their advancement. In our cases, this meant visiting their campuses often, spending social time with them, and eating, drinking, and staying up late with them!
5. That there were times I missed a tremendous opportunity to keep my mouth shut! He would point this out to me gently after the fact but never in advance to muzzle me.
6. That we would go to any lengths to protect the academic freedom of our faculty even if it meant moving them from one campus to another to protect them from political interference and punishment.
7. That for the greater good of the University it was worth it to overlook many of the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of some of our most talented faculty and staff, some of whom could be very difficult to work with and who would try the patience of their administrative ostensible superiors. What mattered most was the quality of their teaching, scholarship, and service to the University. Society must create positions for some of its most talented and ingenious citizens who just wouldn't make it in conventional organizations that would constantly constrain their personal freedoms of thought and expression.

There is just now way I can do justice to this mentor. But he will always be alive and well in my head as I make my own daily leadership decisions. He really made a difference for our institution and so many people. And I wanted to emulate him in exactly that respect. John, you really haven't died at all.

What are Your Roadmaps?

9-10-14

Recently, t'was the night before a vacation trip and after getting in bed I realized that I had forgotten to pack some maps of the region my wife and I were going to visit. I woke up the next morning and went promptly to the room where I had stored my maps for 15 years. Now I don't save everything, mind you. But I am/was, a saver of maps. Maybe they had unconsciously taken on a significance for me that I was not aware of.

Anyway, I am an "everything in its proper place" kind of guy. So great was my surprise when my maps weren't there. The "there" happened to be a storeroom that I share, like most everything else, with my wife and some of her things. The maps were gone. I immediately accosted my dear wife about the whereabouts of the maps. She, Betsy Barefoot, immediately replied that she had thrown them out! Upon further explanation, she explained that she had not realized that I had been putting MY maps in there, particularly those I had been recently acquiring, expensive, purchased, maps for touring in faraway places like New Zealand, France and Italy. Betsy duly apologized. But it has been the subject of much conversation between us for days following, mostly in the spirit of amusement and good nature. But it has really driven home how attached I am to maps!

Betsy's initial reaction was one of surprise when she learned from me how attached I was to those maps. She even said to me: "John, that is so TWENTIETH CENTURY (emphasis mine) of you! Nobody uses maps any more. We have our phones." Well, I have been begging to differ with her since. I still use maps. I love maps. I love to hold them in my lap and to pour over them with a magnifying glass, tracing routes with my fingers and then a highlighter pen. Why smart, pioneering, professionally courageous men like me, and women, have been using maps for centuries. Great discoveries have been made thanks to maps. This is a serious matter.

So now I have lost my maps. What am I going to do to replace them so I have direction for my most important of life's journeys?

Let's think of the "map" or "maps" or "roadmap" as a metaphor. Or we could convert it into an allegory. Surely, as educators we have all used these concepts with our children, our students, our peers, our mentors, our mentees. Most all of us can explicate our maps. And we work with the significant people in our lives to help them develop their maps. But maps are not static. They are constantly being redrawn.

And what happens to us when there is enormous cultural, political, economic, social change that leads to upheavals in our maps. Can we really totally loose our maps as I did when my wife inadvertently threw out my whole collection? When you lose your maps, how do you begin to replace them?

People are losing their maps all the time. The start of the school year is a great time to be thinking about this. Our new students come and many set aside the maps they came with. Others hold on to their home given maps even more tightly than ever. Many of us are working with our first-year students to help them develop new maps.

And, unquestionably, technology is replacing the ways we go about map making. I find myself constantly asking if these changes are for the better. Of course, there is no simple answer.

Three days after discovering the loss of my maps I crossed the state line from Massachusetts into Vermont by car. And the first thing I wanted to do was to stop in the state welcome center where I knew I could get a good map, multiple maps. And I could begin the process of replenishing my old maps, maybe some of which, my wife adds, were 25 years old!

I was privileged to live in Canada for five years during my childhood, from ages 9-14. Canadian school children such as I became mandatory students of world geography. I would never have done that in a typically ethnocentric American school. Why, we don't need to study maps of anybody else! All that matters is ourselves. But I really did study maps in Canada. And I came to love maps. They made me think about where I might want to go during my own life and how my life could be different and what I could learn from these people who lived in these faraway places. I have to admit, I still think this way. I like the way I think. I like what maps have always done for me.

I am in good company with many higher educators I know. Our mental maps are being challenged and redrawn, especially by technology. And we are having to decide what to hang on to, what really matters, what to rethink,

redraw, unlearn, relearn, plan in new ways. Being a twentieth century man and having to learn to be a twenty first century cartographer is hard work. I am fundamentally though a geographer of higher education and of institutions, students, faculty, and staff in transition, as we all look for new maps and decide which of our old maps we hang on to.

How are you coming with your maps? Can/should some of your maps be thrown away? Which ones are you consciously deciding to save and keep living in terms of?

A Preview of Coming Attractions

9-8-14

You are starting a new academic year. I am too. And I want to share what are going to be some of the priorities of my work, especially with the non-profit John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education in this coming year.

- As the developer of the registered trademark and concept "The First-Year Experience" I am now being quoted as saying: "The REAL first-year experience is the gateway course experience." So this fall we are launching our second national cohort for a national effort to improve student performance in high failure rate gateway courses. This is our process G2C[®], Gateways to Completion[®]. The results from our first year of this process are most encouraging—that campuses will join such an effort and can actually conduct a rigorous self-study of their high failure rate courses and take steps to redesign them. As my colleague, and Executive Vice President, Drew Koch, is fond of saying, "We are not a technology firm but we have some sweet technology!" The G2C process includes a "sweet" data platform into which the institution uploads a wealth of data that it has never collected before regarding gateway courses. This data provides evidence for multiple decisions about course redesign. It also provides evidence that persuasively correlates performance in gateway courses by each course with retention rates of students who receive grades of D,W,F,I, in those selected courses. In the second year of the three year G2C process our new predictive analytics process kicks in providing dashboards for all institutions to monitor student progress in the aggregate for each targeted course, and an optional version of predictive analytics to follow and intervene with individual students. This work on improving gateway course performance is my true capstone work and probably the most important work of my career. Our application deadline for G2C is September 30. See: <http://www.jngi.org/g2c-application/>
- We are launching in November of 2014 our newest service to increase student success: Retention Performance Management[™], RPM[™]. This is the most time and cost efficient service we have ever offered. It is also the first form of support we will provide that will be priced as a function of enrollment size. This will mean that for small institutions under 3000 students their cost will be only \$15,000. Our goal here has been especially to embrace smaller, private colleges but we are finding a significant number of larger and private institutions interested as well. RPM will provide a process to yield improvements within a relatively short time frame of six months. It will also feature our new "sweet" technology platform for data collection and analysis; and a new student retention survey, which will be the first survey we have ever offered directly from our organization. The application deadline for RPM is also September 30. See: <http://www.jngi.org/rpm-apply/>
- We will be offering our twelfth national/international cohort of Foundations of Excellence (FoE)[®] since 2003. FoE is a voluntary, comprehensive, self-study and planning process, externally guided by our staff, that leads to an action plan that when implemented to a high degree has been found to correlate with significantly improved retention rates (8.2% in the aggregate for all institutional types). We have had 256 institutions from six countries participate previously. For this fall we have also introduced our "sweet new technology" to further enhance the power of this process. Our application deadline is October 15. See: <http://www.jngi.org/foe-program/application-process/>
- We will be offering our third national Academic and Student Affairs Leaders' Institute on Student Success, in the January-February 2015 window, location TBA in southern California. This will continue the promising work we have already done in two previous meetings in November 2012 and January 2014. The basic idea here is to bring together institutional teams to put them through a process that will enable them to produce a take home plan for a major partnership student success activity. We are very encouraged by the outcomes from more than 100 institutional teams that have experienced this process

previously. Our first convening produced a major statement on how to pursue this work which is available gratis on our website: Seven Principles of Good Practice for Student Success Partnerships: <http://www.jnqi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/7-Principles.pdf>

- I am very pleased to announce that we will be hosting our third annual national and international Conference on the Gateway Course Experience. This will be held in Charlotte, N.C., April 12-14, 2015. See: <http://www.jnqi.org/gateway15/> this is in keeping with the highest priority of our non-profit organization to be the world leader of a major effort to improve student performance, and this retention, in association with the impact of gateway courses.
- And I am going to be atypically coy and cryptic in inviting my readers to follow my blog and our website for an announcement of a major new event we will be hosting later in 2015, something I have wanted to do for sometime but just hadn't gotten to it. But the time is ripe and this to be announced convening is needed more than ever and will fill a gap in support for educators whom I would classify as my kindred souls.
- In addition I am working with four colleagues, Betsy Barefoot of our Institute, Charles Schroeder an independent scholar and consultant, and Peter Felten and Leo Lambert of Elon University, on a new book to be published by Jossey-Bass in 2016.

The above litany is/are my highlights only. I think those and the items I did not mention will keep me busy, off the streets, and out of trouble. I write this after just seeing Tony Bennett perform live three weeks after his 88th birthday. And as a fellow man of the 20th century I feel even more inspired to stay at the top of my game for – yes, my own pleasure and satisfaction, and also the betterment of higher education. I hope you will consider joining me for any of these activities.

Something to Aspire To

9-17-14

I like to say to some folks about myself that “the jury is in on me.” By this I mean that it is now fully apparent what I have—as my father used to say “amounted to.” But that doesn't mean I still can't or shouldn't have aspirational goals. We all should always nourish those.

And I was recently treated to an experience that suggested to me an aspirational goal, by attending a concert featuring the singer Tony Bennett and his forty year-old daughter, who were performing at the Tanglewood Music Center in Lenox, MA.

My wife and I had heard Mr. Bennett approximately 10 years ago at the same venue. The thought had occurred to me then that that might be the last opportunity. Thank goodness it wasn't. And when we heard him recently it was just 3 weeks after Mr. Bennett's 88th birthday.

Out he came on the stage at not a walking pace but with a short jog like gait. And he was dressed in a palm beach off white jacket, white shirt, necktie, black dress slacks, belt, shirt tucked in, and black dress shoes. This could have been 1954 or 64 or 74 or 84. You get the point.

And all he had to do was to just be out there, doing his thing. My accountant regularly reminds me: “John, stick with what you know!” And Mr. Bennett was sticking with what he knew.

It was wonderful to see such a venerable performer still at or at least near the top of his game. Perhaps his voice didn't quite have the full range of pitch it once did. I don't know. I am not capable of judging that. I just know I enjoyed and was inspired by him.

The night before we had attended another concert at Tanglewood, performed by another male singer, less than half the age of Mr. Bennett, Josh Groban. He was not dressed in the manner of a mid twentieth century gentleman. I don't know what a 21st century gentleman dresses like. And his shirt was not tucked in. And he boasted constantly about all his celebrity gigs, awards, etc. In contrast Mr. Bennett offered no hype, no self-promotion. He didn't have to. All he had to be was who he has been, who he is. He just was. He just is.

As I sat there and started running the numbers, I compared his age to mine and what it would take for me to come out on a stage and deliver some kind of performance when I am 88. And this quickly became an aspirational goal. And it occurred to me that the 50th anniversary of the Annual National Conference on The First-Year Experience will be a fine such occasion for me to do just that. So I will see you there, I hope. I know I will be there.

The Power of Just One Educator

9-15-14

I learned so many important lessons in college. And one of them was the Socratic Method. I learned this when I was a junior, in a political philosophy course, the semester that President Kennedy was murdered. One of the many books we read that term was Plato's Republic. This classic and the professor leading the course taught me this method. And I practice this method regularly.

It's really pretty simple. When appropriate, you communicate with others in the interrogative mode. You are a seeker of truth, always. The truth is always under construction. You get at this by asking countless individuals what do they see as the truth of something. And in almost anything anyone gives you in such dialogue you can find at least a half-truth, a scintilla of meaning, value, evidence, insight. And then you add up all those collected half truths and you have created your own.

So I have just been on vacation in New England with my wife. And we spent a week at this place we love so much in Vermont, on Lake Champlain, just below the great college town of Burlington. And the Inn at Shelburne Farms has a large staff of recent college graduates who are servers.

One of them was recounting for me the impact of her "first-year experience." I had asked her if she had taken any kind of introductory first-year seminar type course at the University of Vermont. She told me that she had. And much more than that. She was reflecting four years back on who taught that course, a male history professor, and the impact he had on her.

The course structure provided that the instructor of the seminar section would also serve as the advisor for the students enrolled in the section. This student described in good detail for me the focus of the seminar, what was for her an introduction into gender studies and how this discipline is illuminated by integration with the study of history. She told me she loved the course so much that she decided to major in history! And she also respected the advisor so much that she decided to retain him as her academic advisor for the balance of her undergraduate career. Now this is the kind of impact of the first-year experience that I would want for all students. And this is the kind of thing I can't be reminded of too often.

She also told me that during her first year she was very concerned about the relationship between her choice of major and the even bigger questions of life after college, career, etc. She quoted her professor of the seminar as telling her: "Don't worry about that now. Just do something in college that you love, and everything else will work out and fall into place." Now some could quibble that that advice is overly simplistic and may not be valid – certainly not valid for all students. But that advice has really carried this student well.

My main take away from this serendipitous conversation was that here was my latest illustration of how much power (the ability to influence the decisions and actions of others) one higher educator can exercise over students, for better or worse. And it was also a reminder of the potential impact of engaging pedagogy in a first-year seminar; and of the power of the role of academic advisor.

I didn't have such a course when I was a first-year student. And this was one reason why I almost flunked out. And my first advisor told me in a post mid-term conversation when he was reviewing my grades with me something very different from the message the former University of Vermont student described above received from her advisor. Mine told me: "Mr. Gardner, you are the stupidest student I have ever advised....!" I thought a minute and realized he meant it. What did I do with this message? I decided to get a new advisor, which I did. I went on and have had a career that has influenced hundreds of thousands of college students. And my former advisor went on to become a college president. His discipline, not incidentally, was communication, and he taught speech!

My October 1 Anniversary

10-1-14

This is a day I mark each year. We all have our life mile markers by which we benchmark the onward march of our lives and work. October 1, 1999 is the day I literally moved with Betsy Barefoot from our lives at the University of South Carolina to Brevard, North Carolina. Most people who knew me well thought I would never leave USC. And I didn't think so either. Actually, I didn't really "leave" as I have had the continuing privilege of an appointment there since my move, as a Senior Fellow in the University's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. For this I am extremely thankful.

Betsy and I moved into a new home we had built on a mountain top in western North Carolina. We have a 360 degree view out about 25 miles or so looking at the escarpment of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Blue Ridge Parkway and Mount Pisgah, the highest point in our region at over 5000 feet above sea level. Betsy and I have 21 acres about 1000 feet above the valley below us, where lies the quaint county seat of Brevard and about 6000 people. It is quiet, peaceful, and unbelievably beautiful. We are the last residence on a dead end road at the highest point on the road.

So this October 1 is our fifteenth anniversary in Brevard. And it will be followed on October 18th by the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the non-profit organization, which we founded to focus on excellence in undergraduate education. We had no idea then that we were creating something that would continue and flourish for a decade and a half. And given the challenges that small, non-profit organizations have faced during the ravages of the Great Recession, that is no small feat.

Betsy and I were able to launch this new work thanks to the confidence in our ability to do new work that did not duplicate our former and continuing work for the University of South Carolina, confidence in us invested by the higher education program staff of The Pew Charitable Trusts, under the leadership then of our mentor Russ Edgerton.

I would have probably stayed at USC forever but the state had a policy that applied to all personnel except the sons of celebrity football coaches, a nepotism policy prohibiting in our case the marriage of two people, one of whom would have been in a supervisory capacity over the other. So, we left for love.

When I was in college, oh yes, I was aware of the concept of anniversaries and life's mile markers. But I would never have predicted such anniversaries for myself. And this all became possible because I had attended college and benefited in so many ways from a college education that prepared me to work for a great university, to do the work I continue to do today, and with another individual I met in the same context. When I talk to undergraduates I occasionally point out the research findings on the outcomes of college. They are vast. And in my case they have given me an adult life that has yielded these anniversaries. I bet the same is true for many of my readers.

A New Profession?

10-6-14

I have been in my profession long enough to note new nomenclature and/or the arrival of new professions, new sub specialties. Higher education is becoming ever more complex and specialized so new types of specialized professionals are inevitable. In fact, as the creator of "the first-year experience" as a legitimate field of teaching, administration, student services, and research, I know a new concept when I see one. Or one that maybe is more like old wine in a new bottle.

I am thinking about the relatively rapid proliferation of a new cohort of higher education administrators who are designated as "student success" professionals. So who are these people?

What do they do?

How and why did they evolve?

To whom do they report?

What is the career preparation route into this profession?

Is this really a distinct professional category?

Are they really the same as "Student Affairs" professionals? And if they are, why give them this new designation? Or are they more focused on "academic" administration? But that would assume that Student Affairs administrators are not focused on academic matters? And I don't agree with that.

Does the arrival of this new profession mean that now it is they who are charged with "student success" and those of us in academic administration, student affairs or faculty work are somehow less responsible, less on the hook?

Does the establishment of "student success" as a professional genre somehow mean that the academy decided that people like me who have been working to increase student success for decades somehow weren't doing enough and that a new profession was called for? I would agree that we have not been doing enough?

Or is "student success" really a more palatable euphemism, a code phrase for those higher educators exclusively focused on "retention"?

OK, so we have a new term. But is the student success work substantively different from whatever we were doing before? Or is it, as I asked above, a repackaging and the putting of old wine in a new bottle?

And how are we sorting out the organizational relationships on campuses where there are "student success" units, which are somehow differentiated from "student affairs" and "academic affairs" units?

And what are the levels within this new career ladder, student success—advisors, counselors, deans, directors, professionals, vice presidents?

And how are these roles playing out differently as a function of institutional types where they are found? This is a cross sector phenomenon.

If "student success" had existed when I was getting started in my career in higher education, I wonder if I would have been drawn to it? Upon reflection, I think I was. It just wasn't called that. It was called "professor."

And I wonder where all this is going? Some of my readers will help produce the answer to that question.

Silos: A Must for Farmers, a Negative for Campuses

10-14-14

It is almost inevitable that when I find myself in conversation with other higher educators about what are the major obstacles to student success on their campuses, the word "silo" comes up as a noun, or in verb form as "siloed." And it is a lament. The refrain goes something like: "Oh we could get so much more done for our students if we weren't so 'siloed.'" This blog posting is not going to be a treatise about what causes this organizational reality, but rather a much briefer statement about it including something I am trying to do about it.

Recently, I attended the national roll out event in Washington, DC, for the University Innovation Alliance, a national consortium of eleven research universities, which have received support from six foundations to work together to improve the success rates for underrepresented poor and minority students. How are they going to do this? Many approaches really, individually on each campus but collectively through one primary strategy: collaboration.

Ah, collaboration, so important, but so difficult to do. Many of us, especially our leaders, don't do this naturally. We would rather compete. Competition is so American it's next to godliness. So talking about serious collaboration is almost a heresy. We will see then how this plays out in what will be this well funded case study in cross institutional collaboration. Personally, I am impressed by this effort and am glad to see it taking place. And I hope I can help in some small ways to support this work.

Collaboration has been an essential theme of my work since the early 1970's. I would argue that everything I have accomplished of any significance I achieved through collaboration, and hence jointly, in a shared and not individual manner.

*The University 101 program which I directed at the University of South Carolina for twenty-five years is the archetypal partnership program between central academic administration, Student Affairs, faculty and student leaders.

*The Conferences on the First-Year Experience, and Students in Transition, for 35 years have been organized around bringing the constituencies of academic and student affairs administrators, and faculty from all types of institutions together for sharing of information and inspiration and collaborative activities.

*The conference, strategic planning, and consulting work I have been engaged in has also been based on collaboration between American higher educators like myself and fellow higher educators from around the globe.

*By far the majority of books, articles and other publications I have authored have been co-authored with others. I have a powerful preference for working with others as opposed to myself alone.

*The non-profit organization I helped found and which is named for me now fifteen years old offers multiple services and processes to improve undergraduate success through mechanisms involving partnerships and collaborations.

One of these activities is a continuation of two previous national meetings we have hosted into what will now be our third Academic and Student Affairs Leaders' Institute: Partnerships for Promising Practices in Student Success, January 15-16, 2015, in Costa Mesa, CA. See <http://www.jngi.org/partnership-meeting-2015/> The two prior gatherings involved approximately 400 higher educators coming in teams from 100 institutions. The first meeting produced a manifesto of sorts on the nature of collaboration: [Seven Principles of Good Practice for Student Success Partnerships](http://www.jngi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/7-Principles.pdf): <http://www.jngi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/7-Principles.pdf>

I commend both the upcoming meeting and the [Seven Principles](#) for your consideration. We all need to do what we can to break down our respective campus silos to better serve our students, and in the course of that will find that we will better serve our own units and ourselves.

What's in a Ceremony?

10-20-14

Colleges and Universities need to pay more attention to their ceremonies and to get them right. Ceremonies matter:

- Ceremonies move people.
- They entertain them.
- They bind them together.
- They remind and focus them on what really matters.
- They confirm the values of the institution.
- They give people hope.
- They remind people of their past and they point to the future.
- They are aspirational
- They are inspirational
- They leave people wanting more of the same
- They are a metaphor for how the institution is run.

I am thinking about this as I write because I delivered a keynote address today at the inauguration of the fourth President of the Robert B. Miller College, in Battle Creek, Michigan, Dr. Evon Washington Walters. It was a big deal, a beautifully choreographed ritual.

As I really got into thinking about what I could possibly say to add to the meaning of this ceremony I realized that an inauguration is more than a ceremonial ritual that launches a new era of leadership. The medieval university knew what it was doing when it created this ritual. It is a ritual that binds the new leader to the city so that the two become inextricable. The fate of one is the fate of the other.

An inauguration is also a wedding of sorts. I have been thinking a lot more about the power of wedding rituals since my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I performed our first wedding ceremony this spring for the son of our beloved accountant and his wife. When you preside at a ritual you really have to think through what you are trying to convey is the whole point of this powerful exercise.

An inauguration is a wedding because the new leader takes a vow to have and to hold his/her new partner, for better or worse---and the whole point of the ceremony is to create a self-fulfilling prophecy to augur in an era of the "better." The leader is marrying his institution and its host community.

An inauguration is a wedding because the guests, we hope, will have the kind of experience after which they will bestow gifts needed by the institution.

And an inauguration is also a commencement. It includes multiple homilies with dignitaries failing to resist the temptation to give the audience advice (myself included).

And an inauguration is a ritual where we tell the new leader to "go forth."

And where we ask the whole community present to support this newly blessed union.

An inauguration is also a reunion, where friends, allies, supporters of and investors in the new leader convene to pay respect, to celebrate the accomplishment of the new leader upon her/his elevation to this leadership position.

Thus, inaugurations should be joyous occasions, also like weddings.

- And an inauguration is a commencement.
- The institution gets to begin again, to renew, confirm, affirm its course.
- The new leader gets to mark his/her passage to this new stage.
- And the new leader gets advice from the commencement speaker just as the graduating students do at graduation.
- And inaugurations are reunions for many of their participants just as are commencements.
- The inauguration I participated in today was all of these elements. Nice job Robert B. Miller College.

This ceremony, of course, gets me thinking about how well we do ceremonies in our institutions, especially for the kinds of students I care about the most, and their families: the arriving students (first year and transfer) and departing students (graduating).

What ceremonies do you have for first-year students (hopefully in addition to unauthorized hazing rituals)?

Convocations? (Another medieval ritual)

Convenings for discussions of common/summer readings?

Processions, perhaps with candles, through or by sacred institutional structures (under arches, around special campus locations, etc)

Orientation's special welcomes, activities, parties

Wilderness rites of passage (like Texas A and M Fish Camp)

First day of class rituals with the professor and syllabus—virtually none of them memorable

First day of practice for a team sport, marching band, ROTC

First "rush" meeting for Greek letter social organizations

Too bad we don't do many or any of these for transfer students.

These ceremonies, rituals have been around for so long. Some may have outlived their usefulness. Some may need to be reinvented.

We (as individuals and as institutions) all need human rituals to bind us together in community. And if we don't provide them intentionally for our new students they will create their own, and we may not like as well what they create.

I think we need to get better at ceremonies, especially for the majority of our students who don't live on campus; who don't attend sports activities, who don't attend full-time; who don't attend centuries old tradition bound institutions.

What are you doing? How well is it working?

How can you get your ceremonies right? The College I saw today got theirs right.

Moving to Scale

10-22-14

One of the most frequent common state of affairs that I see on my many campus visits these days is the under developed state of so called “High Impact Practices” (HIPS—see <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>). I suspect my readers know what they are, all ten of them. They are not new at all; they are old wine in new bottles. And the new bottles are the increased credibility these undergraduate education initiatives have as being exemplars for student engagement, success, retention and more, thanks to my friend George Kuh’s extolling the virtues of these HIPS and the support they have received from AAC and U, the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Unfortunately, most of these are offered to a limited number of students and rarely to all students. And hence we lament “if only we could bring them to scale.” I had never heard this phrase before some of my work was fortunate enough to receive support from foundations, beginning in 1999. Then I learned that foundation program officers and leaders were very, very interested, rightly so, in moving from “pilot” to “scale.”

So for example, even though we know have very substantial evidence that HIP’s like first-year seminars and learning communities, have demonstrable impact on retention, why haven’t they been brought to scale. For example, first-year seminars are required on only 50% of the campuses where they are offered, and that represents about 90% of the regionally accredited undergraduate degree granting institutions. And the first-year seminar is less likely to be offered in two-year colleges than in four-year institutions even though it could be argued that two-year institution students need such retention interventions more than their peers at baccalaureate institutions.

Two very important questions follow naturally:

So why haven’t we scaled up these interventions?

And how might we do so?

First, the why? I conjecture the following:

Not enough financial resources. Many institutions mount these efforts through grants like Title III. When the grant ends, so does support for the intervention. They don’t fund these initiatives on regular institutional recurring funds from tuition and/or state appropriated formula funding.

In an era of either no additional resources or reductions in resources, any scaling requires redistribution of existing resources—which means taking funds away from the programs of very powerful internal constituencies—particularly those with tenure who can vote no confidence on the administrators who cut their budgets.

Key resource allocators/decision makers don’t know enough yet about the value of such interventions and hence will not support moving to scale.

A disproportionate number of these initiatives may be run by women, non tenured, staff, Student Affairs, “Student Success” educators who do not have the power, status, to advance their agendas

On any given campus there may have been insufficient assessment done on the outcomes of these less than scaled interventions. With no compelling evidence of effectiveness it’s understandably hard to make the case for scaling.

Competing voices at the table. Some advocate for ramping up this intervention rather than that intervention. So we have competition and in-fighting for a shrinking pie.

Lack of a master plan, a comprehensive vision of what is needed to improve student success. I have personally been involved since 2003 with a self-study, planning process to help create such a vision, Foundations of Excellence ® (see <http://www.jngi.org/foe-program/>). But we have done this with “only” 264 institutions out of 4000+ in our country. And at those places we do frequently see the outcome of scaling up.

Lack of consensus about what really matters for new and transfer students for student success. Because institutions always find the money for what really matters, and if it hasn't been decided that this really matters, then these initiatives cannot be brought to scale.

Many of the decision makers did not experience one of these HIP's when they were a student and hence may not agree that these are essential elements of an effective undergraduate experience.

And I suspect there are other reasons too. But the above are certainly sufficient to prevent the badly needed scaling up of successful student success initiatives.

And now some suggestions for the how?

One mistake many places make is trying to do too many initiatives at once. I suggest more concentration, more focus. This is sometimes difficult to do because senior resource allocators want to love all their direct reports (children) equally. And so they water down the resources where all the units get something and nobody gets very much to do anything of real substance. Not smart. The most effective initiatives I have seen came about at places where senior decision makers decided to make some program or initiative and signature one and really invested in that to bring it to scale. So the senior leaders have to have priorities and the courage to announce them, drive them, fund them.

Thus, you need to make intentional choices and announce publicly your signature initiatives and then do what you said you were going to do. At my own university, our historic signature initiative was University 101. It has taken us 43 years of focus, emphasis, refinement, making the effort a high priority institutional commitment.

Ramp up assessment of your HIP's and scale based on what you find.

Make sure you have the kinds of HIP leaders in place, whom their senior leaders and other members of the campus community will be willing to support. It's very hard to scale any initiative that does not have highly respected leadership.

Demonstrate how a given HIP will also benefit other units whose leaders then will get behind the particular HIP. For example, when academic department chairs see the kind of value added they can derive from a first-year seminar which retains more students for their majors, they are more likely to support its scaling.

Much wiser to argue that ALL students will benefit from the initiative you want to scale than just a sub population, no matter how worthy, deserving, needy that sub population. Hey, this is post affirmative action America. There will never be enough resources for the neediest. So what you have to do is argue what is needed for ALL students—e.g. effective academic advising integrated with career planning.

Consider doing a pilot. Use the cream of faculty and staff to launch. Assess the results and disseminate those. Scale the innovation. Continue to assess and improve. This is what we did with University 101.

Don't try to scale your HIP on your own. Attract partners who will bring more resources: people, money, and political capital. For example, you scale learning communities by offering them in residence halls (assuming you have them). This brings together the combined resources and efforts of faculty, academic and student affairs. Partnerships are a key to scaling.

Publish about your innovation. In the academy, publishing is the currency of the realm. When others outside your institution are reading about what you are doing, the internal credibility of your intervention will increase and be perceived as more deserving of scale.

Look at what your aspirational peer institutions are doing. If they are ramping up you should too. My wife, Betsy Barefoot, visited the world class University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill last February for a focus on their High Impact Practices. She learned that Chapel Hill has the goal of every undergraduate student participating in at least one High Impact Practice per year.

Look at your actual peer institutions. If they are doing whatever you are espousing, this certainly justifies your place doing it.

Use the leverage of your regional accreditor's required quality improvement/assessment processes as the

means to achieve your end of scaling up your initiative. I have seen, for example, a significant number of institutions in the SACS region focus their QEP's (Quality Enhancement Plans) on the first-year seminar. Once that HIP becomes the focus of reaffirmation of accreditation, then that initiative will have moved to the signature initiative level and will definitely be scaled up.

I am sure there are many other ways to scale up. I am encouraged to see many institutions finding the way. If they can, so can you.

Fall: A Good Season for Benchmarking and Transforming

11-5-14

One of the aspects of the fall season for an academic like me is that it is a time when I get to renew annually as I work with a new cohort of students (my students are now the colleges and universities I advise). I am never, of course, a tabula rasa, but the slate is cleaned somewhat.

And mid way through the fall is a time-tested tradition of "mid-terms" when students, especially new students, can ideally benchmark their performance. And this is a most common time for institutions reporting mid-term grades and for early warning systems to kick in for sure, if the institution has one at all. I would argue that initiating early warning interventions half way through the term is much too late, but still better than not at all.

I remember my first mid-term results in college very, very clearly. My grades were 3F's, 2D's and 1 A (the A was in physical education which was an automatic A because I was a varsity athlete!). This called for a conference with my academic advisor. He pronounced "Mr. Gardner, you are the stupidest kid I have ever advised." After letting that description sink in I decided to get a new academic advisor. I give the new one part of the credit for my academic transformation and ultimate graduation from college.

Those first mid term grades were sent home to my parents. This was not a cause for celebration. And this was 13 years before the Buckley Amendment to the Privacy Act, which now prohibits such sharing of performance reports with parents unless the student has waived privacy rights.

So today we could be asking our students.....

to reflect on how they thought at the beginning of the term they would do? and in contrast how are they actually doing?

what adjustments might be in order to improve performance? how might they adjust time commitments and other priorities?

what kinds of assistance are available on campus and could they be seeking? have they talked to the professor(s)?

have they talked to their academic advisor? are they in a study group?

how are they going about learning study skills?

are they spending any time trying to learn from successful students?

Going through a self examination process like this could lead to transformative behavior. I began to improve after that mid term because a sophomore student serendipitously taught me to take lecture notes. I doubt I would ever have made it off probation and through college without this non- divine intervention.

The fall has always been a time of major transition(s) for me.

Finding the Money

11-10-14

All my readers surely have heard the maxim: follow the money. It is an investigative path that always leads to the answer to the question: what's really going on here?

I can't possibly recount how many times I have heard over my career the explanation for why some course of action is not possible couched in the following language options: "We can't afford it." "The institution doesn't have the resources." "We could never get the money for that."

At the same time as I am hearing that refrain I am hearing at the same time the action steps the same institution is taking. But those actions are often not in the same directions, for the same purposes, as those proposed by the people saying the place has no money. A recent case in point is an institution where there the explanation for not being able to take certain actions on behalf of first-year students is "insufficient resources." But this same institution, at this same time, is starting a medical school. And most of my readers have some idea of what kind of resources adding a medical school would take.

So I concluded a long time ago about this matter of insufficient resources, that colleges and universities almost always have the money to do what they want to do. The question instead then becomes: what do they most want to do? Also critical, of course, is who is the "they"?

Decisions about what do you most want to do, ultimately comes down to values, beliefs, that in turn drive the allocation of resources.

And for most of us, there are finite resources. So of course, the institution can't do everything that all its members and units might want it to do.

Thus I have been saying for decades with reference to my own crusade for student success, that the resources available for this priority are directly related to the perceived value of this as an objective. To provide more support for students in need is a values based proposition. In fact, this is exactly the values struggle that is playing out right now in the US mid-term Congressional elections. And we can't assume that the decision makers automatically understand why this effort to enhance student success should be part of their value proposition. Some persons have to make the case—over and over again. For decades. That's been my life's work.

Thus, advocating for resources for student success initiatives ultimately comes down to focusing on the core values that underlie this as an institutional priority. For institutions always find the resources for what they value the most. This means that you cannot take for granted that decision makers automatically understand or agree with the notion that more attention, and therefore resources, should be directed to student success initiatives.

Therefore, I have been using language like: "The First-Year Matters" or "Why is the First Year Important?" This is the language of values based advocacy.

When I see what a college or university spends money on I know what it values. And then I know where I stand, or don't. But this is not a given. The values of leaders are not immutable. They can be changed. They can be educated. They can be moved. They have to be persuaded to want to do something. For institutions always do what they most want to do.

What does your college or university most want to do?

Veterans' Day 2014: What Brings Us All Together?

11-12-14

Veterans' Day is a day I look forward to each year. It makes me feel one with others like no other ritual I participate in. And it makes me wonder what activities could really bind our students together and cut across all the divisions of red and blue state America that they bring to campus with them.

This year's Veterans' Day was picture perfect in my little mountain town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. It was warm, pushing 70. There was not a cloud in the sky. A remembrance ceremony is held this day in front of the courthouse in Brevard, a town of 6000. I estimate that maybe two hundred people turn out, at least five percent of them who are politicians there to take advantage of the podium to pander to voters, largely Veterans like me. This political ritual disgusts me, but it is as American as apple pie.

I stood with a line of sight with the dais and courthouse on my right, the honor guard to the center in front of the memorial for the dead, and the flag, and to my left the face of beautiful Bracken Mountain, where I run some days, about five minutes from my office.

And I know that I am also standing with fellow citizens in front of their courthouses all over our country at this very same hour. I love that feeling. I give in to it and let it take me away, mentally.

I was of similar age to the majority of the Veterans present. The majority of us had to have served in the 60's or early 70's or before. Between us and the traditional age college students of today, there is a huge age and generation gap. Our students are not compelled to perform any kind of national service and relatively very few do so voluntarily. When I occasionally give commencement speeches I always ask the graduates to raise their hands if they are going to serve our country. And very few do. I have even had audiences where not one hand goes up. So I tell them that we expect all college graduates to serve our country.

But I was not similar to most of my fellow Veterans today, I assume, in terms of educational attainment level, socioeconomic status, occupation, religious and/or political affiliation. None of this makes me any better—or worse—just different.

But I am like them in that all of us had this one life changing experience in common.

All of us served a greater good, the common welfare.

All of us took the same oath.

All of us gave up our personal freedom to do as we pleased. I learned that I could still think as I pleased but at times even that was an effort.

All of us were under the total control of our government and were ordered to go and serve somewhere. And usually it wasn't in a location of first choice on what we called our "dream sheets."

All of us had a mission. And we knew that mission. I had never before thought about having a mission. I sure think about it now, every day.

And we were proud of it.

All of us knew there was something that mattered more than our preferences and individual lives.

All of us were connected, bonded.

All of us were able in this one respect to transcend all the other differences that we had experienced in civilian life.

All of us had responsibility for the welfare of others.

All of us had responsibility for taxpayers' property.

All of us ended up doing things we never dreamed we would do, including in my case, becoming a college professor, as ordered by the Air Force.

I was a military psychiatric social worker. Previously in college, I had no idea this was something I was preparing to do.

I know I helped many of my patients. The last I saw any of them was 46 years ago. But I remember many of them vividly.

Their names.

Their stories.

Their suffering.

In my memories I will carry them to my grave.

So what do our college students all have in common with each other: professors, tests, registration, parking, the food service....? What really bonds them together, transforms them, gives them a sense of purpose and mission? Is it mingling with other football fans, cheering, drinking, and celebrating? Is it attending the hottest rock concert in years? Will the performers be anyone they will remember for even a year? Is it a spring break trip? Is it the accumulation of a staggering student loan debt? Is there any sense of shared loyalty, affinity, duty to anyone other than themselves?

If we were to attempt to have our students all address a common good or cause, just what could that be? And how would we go about that? And would they take us seriously?

I wish politicians would run on a platform to bring back conscription.

In the meantime, I would settle for mandatory service learning and/or community service as a graduation requirement. But at most institutions, I won't even get that.

Irrational Love...Or is It Rational?

11-12-14

A few weeks ago I visited my alma mater, Marietta College, on a professional trip in association with a project I am working on with faculty, staff and administrators there. There is no way I can fully describe how much I love that place, that institution and the people I knew there—most of them now gone. If more students felt the way I do in that regard, we would have much less of a retention problem.

Generally, I regard love as an irrational phenomenon. But my alma mater did so much to develop me, support me, nourish me, care for me, focus me, that it almost seems rational that I love the place. If not “rational” well certainly “understandable”, “appropriate.”

By the time I had been to college, graduate school and then in the military, I had come to realize experientially that as a human being, I could be taught to think, feel, and do anything, including hate, kill, and/or love.

Then I came to work for the University of South Carolina. We had this President with this heretical idea that we could teach the students to “love” the University. And if they came to love it they wouldn’t want to trash it and there would be no more student riots like the one that had barricaded him in his office and set his building on fire in May of 1970. So he and a group including myself, started a course, University 101, to teach students to love the University. And 43 years later there have been no more riots. And many of the students really do love the University.

So four decades later, most institutions are doing much more to intentionally teach their incoming students a wide variety of skills, knowledge, attitudes, about making a successful transition into college. A few places I think are actually trying to teach the students to love the institution, its people and opportunities. I know that is still the case at USC. The big question is how we might do this.

Well, for starters, we could identify everything that successful college students do and we could set out to teach students how to do those things.

And we could put all that content and process into a credit bearing course.

And we could introduce new students to faculty, staff, and fellow students who love the institution. And get new students to spend quality and quantity time with such people, each week, as in three contact hours in class at the very least.

And we could get new students engaged in experiences out of class that they would enjoy and which would model enthusiasm for the college experience (attending events, plays, concerts, activities).

And we could make sure that they had professionals to interact with that cared about them, listened to them, encouraged them, and in a few special cases even came to love them.

Yes, I think this is what we need to be doing: teaching new students to love the institution, to love being there, experiencing the transformation that can take place in such a unique environment.

So why do I love my alma mater?

Well, for one thing, it is in a beautiful setting, in the bucolic (I would like to think overlooking some downsides) Appalachian region of southern Ohio. It sits at the confluence of two beautiful rivers: the Ohio and the Muskingum. The small host town of Marietta has 15,000 or so citizens and is steeped rich in history, the first permanent settlement in the Northwest Territory, created by act of Congress in 1787. Its streets are made from brick pavers. In the fall it is particularly beautiful and evocative of the powerful feelings I had when I first began there, as a lonely, depressed, homesick, undecided, seventeen-year-old college student.

So why do I love my alma mater?

Because that is where I discovered that I had a set of competencies that would carry me through life.

That is where I learned to work with peers in groups and came to appreciate them and enjoy professional work.

That is where I came to understand how higher education institutions really work, which has been the focus of my life's work.

That is where I came to understand so much more about how the world works; how I can think like a liberal arts person and integrate many bodies of knowledge.

That is where I developed a number of special relationships, overwhelmingly with men, that have endured through now almost five decades of adulthood.

That is where I learned to overcome my acquired sexist thinking and experience my opposite gender as full human beings just like myself.

That is where I developed my adult work habits.

That is where I experienced the powerful interconnection of a healthy mind and a healthy body by realizing the benefits of rigorous, disciplined, regular, outdoor, physical exercise.

That is where I overcame many of my prejudices learned at home.

That is where I developed my own aspirations rather than those my parents had for me.

That is where I learned that the questions are often more important than the answers.

That is where I learned my lifetime value systems about politics, religion, social justice and so much more.

That is where I became intellectually liberated.

That is where I first saw that I could have an impact on a human organization through my own unique vision, energy, interpersonal and communication skills.

That is where I learned—or began to learn, about how to go about effecting change in the higher education environment.

That is where I experienced what first-year college students, and seniors, needed for successful transitions.

So especially when I return to this hallowed place I am reminded how much I love this institution and for what it stands. It would be irrational for me not to love this college.

This love is powerful.

It is mystical.

It is magical.

It is beyond complete definition or understanding.

It is to be experienced, felt, lived, and acted upon.

I persisted, was retained, in spite of a terrible first term, because I came to love the place and what it was doing for me, its people, its place, its transformative power.

Your students can experience this love too. But you have to be an agent for that.

It's All about Meaningful Work

11-19-14

I have very few original ideas. One was "the first-year experience." Another was "the senior year experience." The list is short. Most of my ideas I get from other people. And I get these ideas usually by two means: I listen to them in conversation or presentations; and/or I read them.

So this piece is inspired by the fact that the other night I was at a conference related dinner in Arlington, Virginia, engaged in a conversation with one of my colleagues at the University of South Carolina, whom I respect greatly, the University's chief undergraduate education officer, Dr. Helen Doeringhaus. After we finished our conversation I noted to myself that she had mentioned to me not once, not twice, but three times, the importance to her as a faculty member and academic administrator most responsible for the welfare of our undergraduates, of "meaningful work." I didn't tell her at that time that I had been doing a word count, but I did later. She really nailed it.

When I think of what I am most thankful for, "meaningful work" is right up there at the top of the list.

I am a seeker of truth, my truth. I learned how to do this in college when I had a political scientist in a political philosophy course teach me the Socratic method. It is that method that I use most often to seek my truth(s). I was taught, by having to read Plato's Republic, that Socrates went about speaking in the interrogative mode with others, drawing from them presentations of what others believed to be the truth—their truths. And I saw Socrates adding up these truths of others to create his own synthesis of truth, and thus inspiring me to do the same.

And that is what I was naturally doing in conversation with my USC colleague who was talking to me about the importance of academics like us doing "meaningful work."

When I was 18 years old and came home from my first year of college, my father was not happy with the new ideas, views, attitudes, I had come home from college with. He told me I needed to have a real world experience, implying to me what so many business types believe, that college is not "the real world." So he arranged such an experience for me: I became a steel worker in a plant that made beer cans. This was sheer torture for a college kid. Millions and millions of beer cans but not a drop to drink.

This experience didn't illuminate for me what I wanted to do when I grew up, but it helped clarify what I didn't want to do. I saw how bereft of meaning was the work that most of my fellow factory workers were doing. And at the end of the summer, all I knew was that I was still very much in search of "meaningful work." I didn't call it that yet. And actually, I was in the process of finding it in college, where I truly regarded my work as "meaningful"—because it led to so much understanding, insight, and intellectual and personal empowerment. It was also in college that I learned from reading Thoreau, writing in the 1840's, that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Of course I was also gradually coming to the awareness that millions of my fellow citizens do not have the good fortune to experience "meaningful work." Instead, they have jobs. Ultimately, I did not have a "job"; I had a vocation, a "calling" as the Latin derivative of vocation yields.

Now I didn't discover this calling until after college and a graduate degree and a military experience, when the Air Force ordered me to do some college adjunct teaching as a form of "community service." It was only then that I discovered my operational definition of "meaningful work": it was being engaged in remunerative work that had redeeming social value and that involved the four things I loved most to do: 1) talk 2) read 3) write 4) help people. I did not have any career planning in college because it

didn't exist in the early '60's in my kind of college. I am thankful to the Air Force and the University of South Carolina that I discovered "meaningful work."

I am struck today by how many college students have never experienced "meaningful work." In fact, my upper SES background students may never have experienced any remunerative work at all! They don't have paper routes any more. And they don't mow lawns either. Instead they have after school and during the summer "enrichment" experiences that help them leverage the college admissions game. And for my lower income students, the fortunate ones have had some employment history but I rarely ever hear that it was meaningful (e.g. in the fast food service economy).

I shared with my USC colleague, Dr. Doeringhaus, that I thought that higher educators could profit from being convened to discuss what is meant by meaningful work, and just what that experience for them in the academy has been. And how those kinds of experiences might relate to efforts to make students more successful. In like manner, I suggested that we try to design some structured processes for undergraduates to learn how to discern what might constitute meaningful work. I am confident USC will figure out a way to do this. Just think, if they left college with any more clear indication of what "meaningful work" consisted of, how much better their life choices might be.

So what is meaningful work?

What I know best is what I found to be the characteristics of meaningful work through my own meaningful work. Now that doesn't mean that my students would have to end up doing what I did and do to experience meaningful work. I am not a faculty person who wants to produce student clones. But surely there are some generic take-aways.

OK, for me, meaningful work is characterized by:

- *a discovery of some idea that becomes the basis for new work

- *a high degree of autonomy and freedom in the work setting

- *the intellectual, professional, personal freedom to raise questions about anything and pursue them wherever they lead me

- *having remunerative work that pays me for doing the things I most love to do (reading, writing, talking, helping people)

- *having legal work that harms no one, including myself, and helps many

- *high levels of personal fulfillment and empowerment

- *freedom to determine where I work

- *and when I work

- *and how I work

- *and with whom I work

- *being engaged primarily in activities that I have initiated as opposed to having imposed on me, or as

my good friend and mentor at the University of California Irvine put it to me thirty years ago—work that enables John to “stay out of other peoples’ meetings!”

*forms of work that require me to continue learning

*outcomes that are win/win for myself and others—it is never about just me

*and thus work that is inherently collaborative, that would be very difficult to engage in alone

*and further is work where my skills, knowledge, hopes, dreams are complemented and magnified through integration with those same qualities in others

*often fun and entertaining

*always demanding, pushing me further

*never finished, yet fulfilled

I think there needs to be more talk amongst academic colleagues and work with our students to help all discover and achieve meaningful work. And this is one more benefit to college in addition to simply “completion” and degree attainment.

Thank you, Helen, for getting me to think about this. And I will continue to do so.

Two Great Universities Reputations Badly Tarnished: Is There A Common Theme?

12-4-14

Over the Thanksgiving holidays I hope you have had more positive things to consider. But for some of my holiday thinking time I couldn't help but reflecting on the intersection, ostensibly coincidental, of the troubles of two great US public, flagship universities: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Of course, these are not only two of the greatest universities in the US, but the world.

One of them is very close to me geographically speaking as a resident of North Carolina—about five hours east of me and its recent troubles are yielding lots of unfavorable local press. I refer to the discovery that more than 3000 students, many of them athletes, had received academic credit for bogus courses, which were really sham courses for which the students did no academic work. The awareness of these ghost courses was known within the University for years but no actions were taken to curtail the practices.

And then much more recently a story in [Rolling Stone](#) reported on a gang rape of a female student in 2012 by a group of fraternity affiliated males in their “house” at the University of Virginia. If ever there was a case of a house not being a home, this is it. As the story has unfolded the University has acknowledged that it has no history of dispensing expulsion as a penalty for perpetrators of sexual assault; and that it appears that the University has taken a stronger stance against violators of the University’s famous honor code regarding academic integrity than it has for male students who sexually assault female students.

There is already a great deal of commentary on these two situations. What can I add to this? What would I be asking my students to consider as they strive to understand how this could be happening in two such venerable institutions?

In both there are the themes of the excesses of a male dominated higher education culture and the tolerance for behaviors that violate codes of conduct that apply to others than male social organization members or male athletes. Both reflect the traditional values system of the residential, traditional aged undergraduate student American university. Both illustrate the power of organizations created and adored by males: the football, basketball, fraternity culture. At one university we see the corrupting force of the need to maintain athletic eligibility debasing the academic standards of an entire academic department, the related academic advising system, co-dependent staff in the Athletics department, and even spreading to students who were not varsity athletes. In the other we see the naked (pun intended) power of a highly privileged male group whose traditional rituals for subordinating women were part of a culture that had become, in effect, untouchable, due to its powerful backers in the University’s larger adult community of supporters.

I suspect that few of us higher educators with any intimate familiarity of the residential university culture are surprised in the slightest by these revelations. But in my case, I was a faculty advisor to a social fraternity at the University of South Carolina for sixteen years. Now my boys were not angels but I never had reason to believe they engaged in such practices. I cannot say the same for the relationship between the Athletic Department and some of our “academic” practices. What surprises me though is our continuing tolerance for these egregious violations of our ostensible values. What has made us so tolerant? So willing to look the other way? So inclined to overlook these violations of our most important values.

Will these incidents lead to substantive change? Perhaps at these two institutions. I saw at my own institution how sensational public scandal could and did change a wide range of institutional practices.

But these incidents go way beyond these two great universities.

Year End 2014: Looking Back Looking Ahead

12-15-14

My last professional trip of the calendar year, one in which Delta Airlines just notified me I had exceeded the four million miler mark (most all of it not on vacation, that's for sure, and instead in pursuit of justice for undergraduate students) was to New York City. My primary purpose was to visit a foundation to seek assistance for my non-profit organization's most challenging crusade: improving gateway course student performance (our work is known as Gateways to Completion™ G2C™ <http://www.jngi.org/g2c/>). Another purpose was to visit for the first time the most unique community college in the country, a harbinger, I hope, of things to come in future community colleges: the City University of New York's Charles and Stella Guttman Community College, where the Founding President is my friend Scott Evenbeck.

While in New York, the world famed citadel of capitalism, my wife and I spent a day with an old college friend of mine and his wife. He told me that he, like me, had seen a long line of people stretching around several blocks surrounding SAKS Fifth Avenue flagship store and immediately contiguous St. Patrick's Cathedral. He further reported that he wanted to briefly visit the Cathedral and asked a NY police officer standing in front of the Cathedral "Is this the line for the Cathedral?" to which the policeman wryly replied "No buddy, this is the line to get into SAKS. You can walk right in St. Patrick's and get a blessing." This struck me as a metaphor for the much greater interest of my fellow Americans in capitalist conspicuous consumption than in the state of their souls.

I look at this year past first as a citizen vis a vis the overall state of our country.

But my view is also as this pertains to the status of my work to improve the attainment and graduation rates of undergraduate college students.

So at the end of this year, I find.....

*That the elite institutions are booming

*The community colleges are facing severe budget reductions due to declines in enrollment due in turn to the recovering economy and resulting declines in enrollment. When the job market improves the very people most in need of college are less likely to attend college.

*In the states whose legislatures are controlled by the GOP, the higher education economy of public institutions has not recovered and in many cases continues to deteriorate.

*All the indicators of economic inequality continue to move in favor of the One Percent.

*Total assets of American households as recently reported by The Pew Charitable Trusts realized huge differences in assets as a function of race and ethnicity

*And yet the economy is moving gradually closer to full recovery—except for all those who have stopped looking for work and have dropped out of the labor market, especially, older white males.

*The country is more polarized than ever in terms of how whites and blacks see their prospects for advancement and especially the fairness of the criminal justice system. And on how they view our current President. One political party has gradually—and intentionally—become the party for white people.

*There are signs that the campuses are beginning to stir again in terms of protest actions for greater social justice. And there are stirrings in the larger citizen body that we cannot preserve our democracy without altering the huge imbalance in the system stacked against the poor, the black, and the Hispanic. And hence some of us must return to the barricades.

*The prospects for political gridlock appear even worse for the year ahead.

*This all has a great impact on the work of my non-profit organization.

We are disproportionately serving, not by intent but as it has developed, public institutions.

We are also primarily serving the less selective institutions who enroll the majority of the country's poor students, the very population the country cares less and less about. And many of us in the academy believe a fix is just to recruit better students. Problem: we aren't making as many of them in the US any more.

In the so-called "Student Success" space that I work, each year, especially this one, brings more and more FOR profit business persons into the higher education arena marketing a plethora of elixirs and cures for the underperformance of college students. Now it is the non-higher educators who know best what we need as they have seen correctly what we have not been able to address on our own. The need is there. This is an economic vacuum. And these business interests are rushing in to fill it. How quintessentially American! And they have the cures. The fixes are largely technology driven with special attention for what administrators and staff do, especially academic advisors, and not on what faculty do.

*If I were my friend, Dr. Charlie Nutt, leading NACADA, the National Association for Academic Advising, I would see this as my opening for more attention to be paid to academic advising, finally. This could be a renaissance for that struggling profession.

I actually encountered less interest this year than last year on the part of institutions in tackling the touch point in the academy where we lose the most students: gateway courses.

And I encountered more faculty bashing. If only we could just get the students to "complete" without having to encounter faculty and courses at all.

And this was a year in which colleges and universities hired more professional staff than they did faculty. We are actually working hard to reduce the number of faculty, especially the pesky full-time tenure track and tenured faculty, who can vote no confidence.

And this has been a year in which I sensed even more the growth of a new sub profession related to the obsessive focus on retention: administrators of student success—Directors, Deans, Vice Presidents of Student Success

As I have asked in my blog before: is this truly a new profession? What are the implications of its rise for what we have traditionally come to call "Student Affairs"? I find, interestingly, the focus of this new class of professionals, more on the academic components of the student experience, which is not an unhealthy development at all.

*But the real showstopper this year in terms of a point of emphasis in student success work has been the new found panacea: analytics—predictive analytics, being marketed now by scores of for-profit companies and even a non-profit like mine. This is going to be a true example of better living and progress for the academy in terms of greater investment in technology. We are collecting and analyzing vast reams of data on the behaviors of our students. We are awash in data. But will we really use it to make decisions for educational improvement? Are the people who really need to act on this data (especially faculty) even getting the data? And does this possession of the most data, the best data, ever, serve to increase how much we care about our students? Will all this data increase our political will to use the data to intervene in new ways with students to increase their success? Will we reallocate the resources necessary to address the needs of students whose real experiences in college we now understand through analytics better than ever? I wish I saw an increase in that will that was commensurate with the willingness of institutions to purchase the electronic potions and salves from the purveyors of analytics. I do not. I conclude, we have just concluded, 2014, The Year of Analytics."

This posting has to sound very pessimistic by now. Let me try to restore some sense of balance.

Looking ahead, I believe the American public will eventually tire of the costs of higher education increasingly being passed along to them, rather than being assumed by government, the creator of equal opportunity.

I believe we will see this coming year, post Ferguson, a year of greater activism on our campuses.

I believe that in all but the elite sector of higher education, the status quo is truly threatened by our insufficient attention to student success.

I believe that the pressure for increased retention and graduation rates will only increase.

I believe that campuses will discover that analytics are only the latest panacea and that ultimately there is no substitute for a focus on what goes on in the classroom, between faculty and students, initially in developmental education, and beyond that in gateway courses.

So I am going to push on this coming year in my quest for calling more attention to the need for the academy to invest more attention and energy in improving student performance in gateway courses. That can only happen if institutions pay more attention to the need to study the current functioning of those courses, redesign those courses, and better support the faculty who teach those courses. It will also be more likely to happen if major foundations pay more attention to this focus on gateway courses. We will see. I have been prophetic before, as when I called for the country to focus on what I coined in 1982 as "the freshman year experience." And US higher education did just that. We now pay far more attention to first-year students. And the sophomore slump. And to the transfer student experience. And to "students in transition." And to "the senior year experience." And to "student success." Now it's time to pay more attention to the REAL first-year experience, the gateway course experience. That's what I am going to do in 2015.

What are you going to do?

What are your resolutions?

How can you make a difference?

If you don't, who will?

ADDENDUM: “Year End 2014: Looking Back Looking Ahead

12-17-14

I realized after I wrote the above titled blog, below, posted on December 15, in which, in part, I reflected upon what struck me as some of the past year’s most significant developments affecting efforts to make undergraduate students more successful, that I had meant to include two other matters that have certainly captured my attention. The fact that I write now only confirms my compulsive character for those of my readers who actually know me and suggests it for those who don’t!

I forget to mention the greater attention we, the academy, paid this year to lack of safety for our female students to protect them from sexual assault and other forms of predatory behavior on our campuses where the dominant culture is still very male focused, even though the majority of our students are female. I wish I could conclude that we did this of our own volition. But, really, we were forced into it by the federal government and the media. Let’s hear it for big government and The Fourth Estate, which as a first resort, not a last resort, protects the most vulnerable of our citizens. Will the developments of this year solve this problem, change our culture? Surely not. But these are still big steps and make me hopeful that our tolerance for this negative and unsafe climate for women will be significantly challenged and reduced.

And I forgot to mention the cumulative impact that some of us at least are beginning to question the outsize role of football on the overall standards and culture of the academy. Witness the revelations about the practices of providing athletes with sham courses at one of America’s greatest research universities, UNC Chapel Hill; the tacit set of dual standards for policing conduct of athletes in Tallahassee, Florida, home of Florida State University; the courageous and very practical financial decision of the University of Alabama Birmingham to drop its money sucking football program; and the prescient piece in the The New York Times Magazine suggesting that football at all levels is “the new tobacco”—referencing the mounting body of litigation against this brain and life destroying sport that may ultimately make it impractical to offer the sport; coupled with the revelations of spousal/partner and child abuse by our most revered gladiators, professional football players. Surely we can do better for entertainment figures and role models for students at all age levels.

If I think of any more developments of 2014 that I forgot to include, I am not going to post another addendum. Thanks for reading and considering.

More importantly, I hope you are using this special so very busy time of year, to pause and reflect on your own list of the key developments of this past year that affect the success of our students.

2015

The Unfinished Movement for Social Justice

1-20-15

We all need reminders of who we could be/should be, me included. Although I like to think of myself as a person who speaks out, takes frequent public stands advocating values based points of view, I could do more. I should do more. This is especially important in terms of the examples we set for our students and our colleagues who may be less powerful than us.

I can't help but be reminded on this 2015 Martin Luther King national holiday weekend of the person, what he stood for, what he said, what he did, what happened to him, his legacy, and the as yet unfulfilled aspects of that legacy. I also remember the events surrounding his murder, on Thursday, April 4, 1968, and the impact of this national tragedy on me personally.

When I heard the news reports that Thursday the first thing I could think of in terms of how I would respond was the fact that I was to teach a class the next night, a Friday evening. At that time in my life I was on active duty in the United States Air Force, proudly and meaningfully so, where I was a psychiatric social worker. I was also a part-time adjunct instructor for the University of South Carolina's Regional Campuses, teaching multiple courses at three of those locations.

About six weeks before Dr. King's murder, I had been teaching one February night down in a rural county seat, Orangeburg, about 50 miles south of my base. I was teaching to a class of nursing students. That night the South Carolina Highway Patrol opened fire on a group of African American college students who were protesting the continuing segregation of a bowling alley. Thirty-three students were shot, all in the back; and three died. The wounded were brought to the hospital where I was teaching. This event was memorialized in a subsequent book, [The Orangeburg Massacre](#). This event was one of the contributing factors to the passage that year by Congress of the Omnibus Crime Control Act, to provide funds for training of law enforcement personnel for crowd control. The Highway patrol officers were twice indicted, twice acquitted.

Being involved in civil rights protests in that era was a very dangerous matter.

My class the day after Dr. King's murder was in Lancaster, South Carolina, a small, textile mill town, where most all my students were the children of mill workers or even a few of the mill workers themselves. They were courageous and inspiring students and I was always thinking of what I could do to get them thinking, interacting, rattling their cages. One of my publicly stated goals at the beginning of the semester was to create a learning environment where it would be possible for each student to have an epiphany, an intellectual insight so powerful that it could be transformative when the insight was converted to an intention to act, and then finally some action.

I had very little time to prepare for that class after I learned of the murder, less than 24 hours. But I decided that I would set aside the planned order of business and instead offer a set of readings as a eulogy for the now late Martin Luther King. I dashed out of our psychiatric clinic at the base hospital to our very good base library where they had an almost complete collection of his works. I checked out four of them and poured over them that evening to make my selections.

The next day I carried out my plan. My students were initially stunned, more I think by what I was doing than the news of the death itself. When I asked them for some feedback to the first reading there was an initial stony silence. But I knew if I gave them time I could wait them out and they would gather their courage and open up. And they did. It was definitely the best class of the term—for me and some students, but not all.

The next Friday evening when I arrived on campus to teach the same course, there was a note in my

mailbox from the campus chief executive officer, a man I rarely saw because my class was definitely not in the normal classroom period of campus operations. In fact, my class was the only one offered at this time. And this was because the campus was so desperate for an adjunct instructor for this course that they let me teach it at the only time I was available, given my 65

It's High Time I Wrote!

2-23-15

I have truly been delinquent about staying current with our Gardner Institute blog. January 20 was my last posting. My birthday is February 2, much more notably known as Groundhog's Day. I emerged from my hole in the ground, multiple times that day, saw my shadow each time, but did not return for hibernation.

Because I am so far behind I am not going to comment in depth today on one topic, but rather more in passing on a number of them.

In January the non-profit organization, which I lead, the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, hosted two back-to-back professional development conferences in California. Conference hosting is not one of our signature lines of work but we do engage in this occasionally. This activity in particular reminded me of the first conference I hosted in the First-Year Experience series in California. That was in 1986 and it gave a tremendous further "kick" or "bump" to the national movement known by its acronym, "FYE." In my position then at the University of South Carolina, I had hosted the founding FYE Annual Conferences in 1982, 83, 84, and 85. Our attendance was 173, 351, 500—and I don't remember 85. But I made a crucial—and smart—decision to host two versions of the conference in 1986—an "East" and a "West" version and that year we had 1600 attendees. The FYE West Conference was co-hosted by the University of California Irvine, thanks to our friendship and partnership there with a prominent scholar, Professor John Whiteley. So this January, I got a chance for West Redux, déjà vu, and both these meetings were very successful, again co-hosted with UCI Irvine where my long-time friends John Whiteley and Thomas Parham extended their hospitality. One of the meetings was a new one for us, a Retention Symposium, in which we offered a facilitative process to help institutions return home with a concrete plan to address retention challenges. We plan to repeat this meeting in Asheville, N.C. on June 8-9, 2015. The second meeting was our third annual offering of an institute for senior academic and student affairs' leaders on partnerships for student success. California is so important as a bell weather state and higher ed economy. Thought leaders ignore it at their own peril.

In early February, I returned to the 34th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience, this year in Dallas. Some 1800 attendees came from 17 nations. The meeting was as vibrant as ever, still drawing a huge percentage of "first-time attendees" which suggests continuing new lifeblood for the movement. The 35th annual conference will be held next February in Orlando. Long may it live.

At this 34th Annual Conference, it was announced that the leader of the University's first-year programs and conferences, Stuart Hunter, will retire this June 30. Stuart has been my most able successor and has overseen the further evolution of the initiatives I founded to levels of support, institutionalization, impact and replication that I was not able to attain in my period of leadership. I am very proud of her accomplishments and she will be leaving these activities so important to the wider higher education community in very, very good shape—and in very good hands. Her two most senior colleagues, who lead the instructional activities and the Center's conferences, publishing and research activities are, respectively, Dan Friedman and Jennifer Keup. These are outstanding professionals whom I am also proud to call my colleagues. They assure the kind of continuity that all of us who respect these programs would want and expect. I urge my readers to reach out and offer their continuing support to Dan and Jennifer.

And, the undeclared phase of the 2016 presidential election is underway. It appears as if higher education will be an issue. I am saddened to see the attacks from Republicans in North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Illinois, on university "centers" whose missions these conservative leaders do not appreciate (in NC where three such centers are being recommended for closure) and/or on public university budgets, most notably by Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin. The tension between our more liberal campuses and more conservative political leaders is a long standing theme in the history of US higher education. But recent events are testing the strength of academic freedom, and perhaps ultimately tenure. We are being forced to adapt and change. Our cultures are becoming more "corporate." I am confident though that these great universities are sufficiently resilient that they will outlast these current foes.

Spring can't come soon enough in this winter of winters for my eastern US readers. And some of us would say the same for the 2016 presidential election!

I will return in less than a month!

Write Our Own Future

3-11-15

It is important to be able to point to current, real world events, to create teachable moments for our students.

Just six weeks ago, President Obama, in what for me was one of the most memorable lines of his State of the Union speech, told the country it was time “to write our own future.” I say memorable because that was really what has stayed with me from that speech. Yes, there was much attention paid to what some commentators called the President’s defiant tone. I realize that affect (perceived as “tone”) is important. But what matters more to me is the substance of what he said.

And I think this idea of “write your own future” is a great way to characterize for students what the college experience is all about.

It is about a very personal process, personal to each student. We carry this to great extremes in US higher education because we allow our students so many different choices—I believe too many, but that’s another matter. But the end result is the students’ individual “pathways” (a current buzz word for those who would improve higher education) are vastly different and hence personal.

I even take this language literally. Students should be asked to first think and reflect about their future, but then to “write” about it, literally. Students aren’t doing nearly enough conventional writing. They think they know themselves best. What a perfect subject to be writing about. In fact, I am working on a project now to integrate so-called “college success” content into the teaching of writing. Write about themselves and their futures especially during the first year but then in successive periods too. Write about it in first-year seminar courses, English composition courses, any course where personal reflection and application is relevant. Write about it in journals, papers, customized, personal research. Write about it in the creation of text for electronic portfolios.

Writing something is a creative process. The writer is the creator. So the student, as the writer of her/his own future, is the creator. The student needs to own this creation. It is not that of their parents/friends, even the society. Not that we don’t influence the writing. We do. We should. But ultimately we need to get students to do the creating in an intentional process from which they own the outcomes. They hold themselves responsible.

Write your own future, is about personal planning—academic planning, life planning, family planning, business planning—and more. We have to teach our students more about how to go about this. Hence, one more argument for paying more attention to the beginning college experience.

The first year is the foundational period for: “write your own future.”

If we really believed in the importance of college as a process to “write our own future” we would be paying a lot more attention to the importance of academic advising. I do see some signals out there in the academy that “advising” is having a renaissance in terms of attention. Certainly big public universities are spending a fortune on data analytics to provide advisors with more information to better guide student decision making (writing their own future). The jury is out on whether the use of analytics will really result in substantially improved student progress, much as we all want that.

New Frontier for the First-Year Seminar

4-2-15

As many of my readers will know, there are multiple terms used to describe a near universal course in US higher education designed to improve the success of beginning college students. The correct academic nomenclature for this unique course genre, which has been around since 1882, is “first-year seminar.”

But many campuses have adopted terminology originally developed by publishers of college textbooks for these courses: “college success” courses and/or “student success” courses. And there are many institution specific names for these courses such as my own University 101 course at the University of South Carolina.

These courses were designed for beginning college students. And while I have had a number of anecdotal reports over the past quarter century of the course concept being adapted to the high school setting, I had never observed any such activity at scale. One version of a secondary school offering would be for ninth graders as they transition into high school, not college. The other versions would be the archetypal college success course offered for high school students at their high schools, or on a college campus, or on line.

However, I recently had the opportunity to visit San Jacinto Community College in Houston, where to my astonishment they are offering their college success course for ALL high school dual credit students. So we are not talking here about a few sections for a boutique program for a special population of fast tracking high school students. This is an institutionalized, College-wide effort, for all new matriculated students, all dual credit students, all students in their Early Colleges. And these students do this either as their first course of dual credit or in the first term if they are at the college level.

This is a tribute to the success this course has had over the past decade of promoting greater levels of subsequent success for students who complete the course when compared with students who did not participate in the course. This level of success outcomes led the College to decide to make this course mandatory.

There is a bigger picture here, of course, and that is the question of when should “college” begin? These educators are realizing that to wait until students are actually in college may be too late for some and not as effective for others if they had started earlier in the pipeline.

So what should we be calling these courses for students who are still technically in high school? In what ways should we be adjusting the content?

What kind of professional development should we be providing for the instructors? Is there content in some college success courses that would not be appropriate for high school students? What will be the implications of students who take this course before actually entering a college or university? Will they be shortchanged in any ways by not having the more conventional “college” success course? Time—and assessment—will tell. But we really do need to push ahead and learn what are the outcomes.

Because the first-year seminar is a highly imitative concept, this model will surely be imitated. I will be watching—and supporting—that with great interest. Kudos to San Jacinto Community College.

Learning from the Mistakes of Our Rulers

3-16-15

Students have wonderful learning opportunities by watching the decisions made, actions taken, messages delivered, by both their campus and national leaders.

Right now I am very absorbed in observing the fate of the President's signature health care legislation, which is being challenged by his opponents before the US Supreme Court.

At the very least I think students can learn the truths of at least three pieces of our collective adult wisdom:

1. Better be careful what you ask for—you might get it.
2. Better have a plan B.
3. It is a lot easier to be against something than for something (translated as it is often easier to run for office than to actually govern; and/or if you are going to go on the attack and you win the battle, you better have a credible alternative).
4. Timing in life is everything.

So, the President's opponents have been relentless in their disdain for him and his Affordable Care Act. It has been vilified like few other pieces of legislation in US political history (compare to FDR's Social Security Act or LBJ's Civil Rights Act). His opposing party has demanded the dismantling of the Act. Now it appears they may get what they have been asking for. But, if they do, they could anger seven to ten million voters who otherwise would not have been able to gain health insurance. And the opponents surely will be held responsible for what could be a train wreck for the US healthcare delivery system, which now has been restructured by the ACA. The party of opposition could end up being held responsible for an even greater political debacle than the one they have been ranting against, and only 15 months before the next presidential election which they are desperate to win (another lesson: timing in life is everything). Moral of the story: better be careful what you ask for....you might get it.

And that suggests the second lesson: better have a Plan B. What would be the impact on student success if we could get them to ask themselves much more frequently if they don't need a plan B for whatever course of action they are taking of the moment? Consider alternative verbiage to Plan B: "fallback position" or simply "alternative."

So if we get rid of the ACA, how do we continue to reduce overall healthcare costs? How do we provide insurance for the millions who will lose it and who really do want and need it? How will we provide coverage for people with pre-existing conditions? How will we provide insurance for millions of college students who can now stay on their parents' policies until age 26?

OK, I get it. The opponents abhor the President. They don't want him to succeed at anything. They don't want the government mandating that citizens have health insurance, even though government mandates we do all kinds of other things like have driver's licenses, obey traffic regulations, etc. I am totally clear on what the opponents object to. But if given the chance to destroy the country's latest effort to expand health insurance and reduce overall healthcare delivery costs, what would the opponents provide as an alternative?

This is a great critical thinking exercise for our students. So, you are like your parents and object to Obamacare. What do you understand about the healthcare system problems that led to this legislation and what would you have us do to improve our country in this regard? How does this situation affect you now—and, perhaps more importantly, how might it affect you and your children in the future?

Ode to a Retiring Colleague

7-7-15

For all of us who have been public service employees, the date June 30 has multiple significances: the end of the state government fiscal year, and the most preferred date for state and local government retirees to retire.

I took “early” retirement June 30, 1999 and have been flunking retirement ever since. My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I established a not-for-profit higher education firm, the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education immediately after we left South Carolina. One of the triggers for my own move was my disillusionment over the decision to place the Confederate flag at the foot of the steps to the statehouse.

Since my own date for transition I have gone back down to South Carolina for an occasional retirement celebration for a special colleague, this year being a case in point. My colleague of 37 years, Stuart Hunter, “retired.”

Stuart was my successor at the University of South Carolina who was responsible for the University 101 programs and the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. These initiatives have flourished since my departure, and not necessarily because of it! Rather, I prefer to think that the success of these pillars of support for the US “student success” movement is due instead to a number of factors: 1) Stuart’s outstanding leadership; 2) the extraordinary support (especially during and in spite of the Great Recession) of the University’s highest level(s) of administration; and 3) the continuing participation of thousands of USC students and in like manner, thousands of higher educators around the globe.

Stuart leaves behind the administration of the multiple courses and their faculty/staff/peer leader development programs, including University 101, 201, 401 in the very able hands of Dr. Dan Friedman. And in like manner, an equally but differently capable Dr. Jennifer Keup, will carry forward the leadership of the National Resource Center.

Although she was not influenced by me in the slightest regard in this manner, Stuart also will not be totally retiring. She will be on campus several days a week very involved in the academic credit bearing work of the organization and other special projects for the University. I am so grateful to my University for not letting this wonderful corporate memory and contributor fade away. Stuart will join me as a Senior Fellow and, as I have explained to her in all seriousness, this title is not meant to be a reference to our age, rather our wisdom.

It occurs to me of course that Stuart and I are becoming less common in the ranks for American higher education professional leaders in that we elected to spend the entirety of our careers at one institution. Neither of us have any regrets about that. Both of us left the place in a little bit better shape than we found it, for our having being there. Both of us met our spouses there and raised our children with the University being part of their lives.

As I reflected at Stuart’s retirement reception, the University was founded in 1801 and the first students arrived in 1805. The oldest part of the campus is found inside what is known as “the shoe” or “horseshoe, a wall built in 1821 to keep the all-male student body inside to prevent themselves from killing each other in the code of dueling practiced after drinking in nearby taverns. As we walk in that sacred place we always are in touch with the eternity of the place. Both of us were always conscious that the University had been there before us and would be there after us. We had one overriding goal: to leave a legacy by making the institution even more student focused and successful for those students. I realize that even though many of our peers will not dedicate an entire professional life to one institution, that nevertheless, no matter how long they stay, they can do the same thing we did: contribute to leaving the place better than they found it.

When I was an impressionable child, my father said to me repeatedly: “Son, find a good company and stick with it.” I did that. So glad I did. Stuart did too. I’m so glad she did.

Way Down South in Dixie

7-7-15

The tragic terrorist attack and related killings; the extraordinary forgiveness offered by the families of the victims; the visit of President Obama; the calls by the Governor of South Carolina and my University President, Harris Pastides, to take the flag down; and now as I write the formal debate in the South Carolina Legislature to take the flag down—all have unleashed a torrent of memories for me about my own experiences with racism and bigotry under the official auspices of the Confederate flag.

I lived in South Carolina for nearly 33 years, from 1967-1999, coming there involuntarily, staying by choice, and leaving also by choice—although not leaving completely because of my two sons and friends who live in SC and my continuing appointment with the University of South Carolina. I am hardly a detached observer of the recent events, which have moved me profoundly.

My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I had just been this June in Charleston, the Holy City, so named because of all its historic churches, including the one turned into a charnel house, for nine days during the annual, internationally acclaimed Spoleto Arts Festival. We had walked by the site of the massacre several times just thirteen days before the tragedy.

Looking way back to my relative youth, I did not want to come to South Carolina, but that is where the US Air Force sent me. I volunteered for Vietnam to get an alternative duty station but Shaw AFB is where Uncle Sam sent me. I was a military trained psychiatric social worker stationed at an Air Force hospital in Sumter, S.C. This was two and a half years after Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act. The base was fully integrated in housing, schools, everything. But as soon as one left either the front or back gates of the base, you entered another country that was totally segregated by race. But at least the Air Force showed us how we all could and would live and serve together.

My first day on the base I was introduced to an America I had never experienced before. I was ordered to report to my Squadron Commander for an individual orientation to the unit briefing. As I stood rigidly at attention I looked down and saw that he was an African American. Wow. Other than one of my drill sergeants in Basic and Officer Training, I had never been under the command of anyone whose skin was not the same color as mine.

This African American gave me the gift of my lifetime career. He gave me a direct order to perform volunteer service in my off duty hours by engaging in university teaching for the University of South Carolina. And he specifically told me to whom I was to report to arrange this. That was a life changing event.

A few weeks later I walked in to the President's office of Morris College, a small, historically black private college in Sumter, S.C. I told his secretary I wanted to see about being a volunteer, non-compensated, adjunct instructor. It was a very awkward moment for her. But she secured the willingness of the President to meet with me. He was very polite to me and thanked me and told me he would take my offer under consideration. But I never heard further. I didn't realize how he must have thought I was from another planet. In 1967 white men just didn't walk in off the street and offer to teach for free at a black college. Coincidentally, I am spending a day on this campus this coming August.

During this same spring term of 1967, one night I was eating in the hospital "chow hall" and a call came out for volunteers to take an ambulance out behind the black gate where there was a civilian who had been reported as having been struck by a car. I volunteered. When we arrived at the scene we found an African American man already dead. So we called the Sumter County EMT operation but we did not specify the race of the deceased. When they arrived, they told us that they would have to send the coroner's pick up truck, because they only put white people in that ambulance.

I soon noted in South Carolina that there were many restaurants that had signs on the front door proclaiming "WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE SERVICE TO ANYONE."

Late that spring, as my first college course was into final exam period, I drove to the nearby Poinsett State Park in search of a quiet restful place to grade my students' final exams. I engaged a park ranger in conversation. He told me the federal government had ruined his beloved park because now "colored" people would "take over" the park and whites would not want to come. I guess he assumed that because I was white that he could share this with me.

In my ensuing 31 years in South Carolina, I participated in many family reunions in South Carolina state parks. Yes, blacks did indeed come. But so did whites. The prophecy of doom was totally unfounded.

The following fall, 1967, on the opening night of my Sociology 101 class at a Regional Campus of the University of South Carolina, I began my class of 80 students, on a Friday night at 7.30. One, only one, student, was black. And he sat in the very back row. I knew that this was a moment of history. He alone was racially integrating this campus. After I went over the syllabus I asked if anyone had any questions. A white male student said "Yes, sir, I want to know what you think about us having to have N----- in our class." I couldn't believe—didn't want to believe-- what I was hearing. I knew this was it. I was about to loose the whole ballgame. So I decided I would try to finesse it. My reply, delivered with my best scowl was: "I don't believe I heard you. Would you care to repeat your question?" I hoped he got my not so subtle message and would not repeat the question. But he did. So I said: "This time I heard you. And you have just violated one of the principles of this course which is that we all are going to respect each other's dignity regardless of differences in our demographic characteristics. Now do you have any other questions?" Surely he would get the message and let the matter drop. But he didn't. So this time I said in the best bluff I could muster up: "Look, I am an Air Force trained killer and if you don't get up and leave this classroom I am going to come down your row and bodily remove you!" He rose and walked out. I honestly don't know what I would have done had he remained in the classroom.

From 1983-96 I was the University's Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for that campus and in that capacity I came each year to the graduation ceremony. And as I looked out into the totally, racially integrated audience, I thought of that one brave young man who took that class with me in 1967 and paved the way for all these other students.

During the next semester, in late February, 1968, I was teaching Sociology 101 one weekday night to Nursing students enrolled in a degree program the University was offering at a small hospital in a rural county seat in Orangeburg, about 45 miles from the State's capitol. Literally as the class was underway, all hospital operations were thrown into pandemonium as the victims from a mass shooting were brought into the hospital. That night was the occurrence of what went down in US history as "the Orangeburg Massacre." Thirty-three black college students, part of a larger crowd who had been protesting the refusal of white owner of a bowling alley to admit blacks to his business (four years after the Civil Rights Act), were all shot in the back, by the SC Highway Patrol. Three of them died. Congress responded by passing the Omnibus Crime Control Act to provide funds for training of police and national guard troops in crowd control tactics. So two years later when white students rioted at my university, they were not shot but they were tear gassed. That was progress. The highway patrol shooters were processed in both the state and federal judicial systems and no jury would convict them.

Later in Spring term, 1968, Martin Luther King was murdered on a Thursday. My class was the next evening. So I decided to deliver a homily about his life and times and suspended all other regular class activities. That class became only about Dr. King's life and accomplishments. I did a reading from four different pieces of his writings. The next Friday night, the campus chief executive officer met with me and told me that a group of students had come to see him complaining that I was a "N----- Lover." I was urged to refrain from class consideration of "controversial" topics, including most notably, the war in Vietnam.

I had come to work full-time at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, in the fall of 1970. I had my military experience honorably behind me, and also two years as an Instructor of History at the former state supported women's normal school, Winthrop College. Although I was popular with the students there and respected by my colleagues, I had run afoul of the administration, which non-renewed me because of my liberal civil rights activities. Specifically, that meant they were displeased with another professor and me who had founded a local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

To my relief, and delight, in contrast, I found that academic freedom was alive and well at the University of South Carolina. Before leaving Winthrop I had taught one summer in its Upward Bound program. Federal site inspectors found the program in non-compliance for establishing a hostile climate towards the students. After arriving at USC I applied for a summer teaching position with the University's own Upward Bound program, for which I was accepted on the faculty. The director of that program, the University's then chief student affairs officer, a salty retired naval officer, told me: "Well, if you enjoyed teaching in that other lousy Upward Bound program, you are going to have an orgasm in our program!" The USC program did not quite live up to that literal billing but it was transformative for me as a young college professor. What I learned were two things: 1) how to motivate students when I could not use

grades as the carrot or stick; and 2) how to understand and empathize with black kids who had grown up in de jure segregated school systems.

I learned that my USC had been the first southern predominantly white university to seek and accept an Upward Bound program in 1966, because we were the first to commit to racially integrate the residence halls, a requirement of receiving the federal grant.

And this extraordinary Upward Bound program showed our President what could be done and should be done for all entering students, and not just the relatively few who received special funding from the Federal government. What he had seen in Upward Bound in terms of student transformation led him to incorporate a number of similar experiences into the design he influenced for the launching of our now famous, University 101 course. He invited me to a summer think tank to design that course in 1972 and two years later, I was his third choice to become the first faculty director of that program, but the first two turned him down. Unlike me, they were both tenured full professors.

Three years after we launched University 101, it was discovered by my beloved USC colleague, Paul Fidler, in research he conducted on the effectiveness of University 101, that black students who participated in University 101 were achieving greater gains in predicted versus earned GPA's and retention than were white students. I took great satisfaction in this unintended reverse discrimination in favor of these students whose ancestors in SC had been enslaved and discriminated against ever since.

In 1974 I represented my alma mater, Marietta College, at the inauguration of a new president at the South Carolina Episcopal HBCU, Voorhees College. There I witnessed the amazing spectacle of the former segregationist Dixiecrat candidate, Strom Thurmond, sitting through that whole ceremony and courting the black vote. Times had changed thanks to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Now "those people" could vote.

My university also became in the 70's the first of our institutional peer group to have an African American become SGA President. This was truly national "news" and Walter Cronkite ran it as his lead story one night, to my pride and pleasure. That young man later became a psychiatrist and a member of the University of South Carolina School of Medicine Faculty.

For much of my time at USC black students had higher graduation rates than our white students. In 1986 my colleague, Michael Welsh, did a study, supported by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, contrasting the characteristics of black students who graduated as compared to black students who had not graduated. What he found was that the graduates were more likely:

1. to have taken University 101
2. to have been a member of a black greek affiliated student organization
3. to have had a black roommate as a first-year student
4. to have had at least one black faculty member for a course
5. to have been a member of a student organization that was advised by a black faculty or staff member

In 1998, the year before I left South Carolina for North Carolina, everything seemed to come full circle. For one thing, a former student of mine who had been my undergraduate advisee in our Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies degree program, David Beasley, ran for a second term as Governor. One of his platform planks as the Republican candidate, was for the removal of the Confederate flag. He was resoundingly defeated. The candidate who did win, the son of one of my fellow faculty members, invited me to the Inaugural Ball. At this black tie event, I noticed an African American gentleman whom I thought I recognized. Then it hit me. This was Gary Bell whom I had taught in Upward Bound about 25 years previously. I approached him and addressed him as "Mr. Bell." He quickly corrected me and suggested I address him as "Dr. Bell." We caught up on each other's lives and I learned that he had gone on to undergraduate school at Tuskegee and then to medical school and then returned to practice medicine in Columbia. He gave me feedback that I have never forgotten. He told me that I was his first teacher who had ever asked him to write anything, which meant that I assumed he had any ideas worth writing. When he told me this at first I found it hard to believe. But he assured me, that up to that point in his school history, he had never been asked to write anything, literally. For Dr. Bell had been another one of my students who had come up through the segregated school system of South Carolina, where black kids had shorter school year terms and vastly inferior education for, as we all knew, too much education could ruin a good field hand.

For most of my time at the University I saw what I believed was a powerful laboratory at work for how we all could live, work, recreate, eat, date, marry, raise families together. We were the new south. The Confederate flag flying

proudly just a block from the University campus did not represent the University—or most of the state that I had come to know. It has been time, for a long time, to remove that symbol of the power structure that enslaved other human beings, once and for all.

My experiences such as those related above, have made me whatever it is that I am today as an educator and citizen. I am grateful to South Carolina, for all that is has taught me, for better or worse. I believe that henceforth, things are in the direction of “for the better.” I want that for my two grandchildren who live there and for all their fellow citizens.

Do It: Mystery Shop Your Own Institution

JULY 7, 2015

Summer is normally a time when my wife, Betsy Barefoot, and I convert our mountaintop home in the western Blue Ridge Mountains into summer camp for visiting grandchildren.

But this year we did something different. We took two of our grandchildren on trips for college admissions visits. It was a real eye opener. Let me get right to the point of this posting: if you haven't been on the Admissions tour of your own campus, do it. But "mystery shop" it if you can pass incognito. You need to know what your prospective students are being told to expect. The process of creating expectations for your incoming students is tremendously important for influencing the outcomes you want for their college experience. This is when you can begin to spell out what is the history and traditions of the place, its market niche, its core values, its promised experiences to come.

I want to report on one visit we made to a national, competitive, selective, research, university (not my own).

My 17 year-old granddaughter especially wanted to visit this institution. She is an outstanding student, academically and athletically. She had heard in her peer group that—let's call it University X or UX, was "awesome" and that students there had a great deal of "fun." We also had a fourteen year old grandchild along who aspires to be an engineer. He is also a high performing kid.

When you arrive at UX for the Admissions tour you enter a "Visitor's Center." The lobby and waiting areas feature many posters and symbolic messages largely revolving around X's athletic programs. There is one prominent display in a case under glass reporting X being named as the "#1 tailgate" in the region. That point was driven home verbally at least three times on the subsequent tour. In my way of thinking "tailgate" is code for excessive consumption of alcohol before, during, and after football games. I am sure some others on the tour made the same connection, particularly the prospective students. However, the tour guide made it clear that tailgating was not just for students. She reported that everything associated with football was also for the "family." We were told repeatedly that coming to X is like belonging to a family.

When you go to a big place you might as well start out being processed in large groups because that is going to be the way the place works. On this summer Saturday morning, the "tour" consisted of approximately 130 prospective students and their families. This cohort was definitely drawn from a national population base.

The formal introduction began in an auditorium style configuration. We were asked how we were that morning and when we did not reply in a sufficiently loud and enthusiastic manner, we were instructed to repeat our answers to that question, several times. The expectation was clear: the X leaders wanted us to show some enthusiasm.

X did not have any professional staff from Admissions or elsewhere. This group of 130 had four undergraduate student leaders. I reasonably assumed that they had been carefully selected, trained and scripted.

As we waited for opening remarks, a slide show rotated on one screen. There was print material on some of the slides, but no accompanying music or voice over. The font for much of the print was too small for me to read and I was sitting in about the fourth row back, in the center.

The student master of ceremonies rattled off some basic information about admissions procedures and then asked if anyone had any questions. It was my interpretation that the sub text from the group leader was that this was not really the time or place for questions and the student leader answered them brusquely and impatiently, obviously wanting to get on with the tour.

Thankfully, not all 130 were going to tour together. We were split into four groups. As each prospective student's name was called out to effect this division, the students were instructed that when their name was called they were to respond as loudly as possible "GO --- (Enter name of X's mascot)!" That set the tone. We were going to hear a great deal about athletics on this tour.

The first stop on the tour was a large open grassy area. Here we were told about what would happen during the opening week of the term during an extended welcome orientation, and in particular, how a "student activities fair" would take place in this very area, under a large tent, where students could choose from over 400 clubs and

organizations to get involved with. The objective of all of this we were told was to have “fun” and to get “involved.” We were told that in a national survey X ranked very high because over 90% of its students reported that they were “happy” at X. I was pleased to know that the taxpayers of this state were making such an investment to produce “happy” students.

Throughout the two-hour tour the only references made to the purposes of the institution were to: having fun, being happy, and eventually getting a good job. Considering this was a place I thought was especially noted for its STEM work, I found this scripted presentation of the purposes of the University to be particularly puzzling. To reinforce my cognitive dissonance, our tour guide repeated on multiple occasions that she had changed her major (to Communications) in her first year because of her challenges with Chemistry. As she put it “I don’t do anything with numbers.” She apparently was in the right place to go through college that way, even though I found that hard to understand.

Totally missing from the tour were any references to any other possible purposes of higher education, such as preparing for a life of leadership, civic responsibility, service to society, support of the arts, you name it. In fact, with reference to public performances in the arts space, the closest we heard was reference to great rock concerts that were brought to campus.

We then moved on to “President’s Walk” where we learned a great deal about the institution’s President, most notably that “he is young, in his early forties.” We were also proudly informed that “He is President of all the other Land Grant university presidents.”

And next came a residence hall. We heard a great deal about on campus living options and food choices. The virtues of food options were extolled as was “free laundry” meaning no charge to students for use of the laundry machines. That was described as a big hit. It was explained to us that the one area of campus life that had not been rated high historically was the food service and thus, how that had been a focus for special attention for improvement in the past two years. Universities have all sorts of distinctions and I would assume on such tours would tout what they are proudest of. In this case, X is now proud of the food it provides its students.

We also heard about another student concern: parking, and how much more available and less expensive it would be than at many competitors.

We moved on to the Student Activities Center where it was explained to us in more detail what were the opportunities for students to engage in organized group activities. This building was separate from the student union building which we were not shown.

We were also not taken to any classroom or research laboratory facilities. I found that strange given that this is a world-class research university. There was no information offered on any types of research being conducted at this university or what the purposes of a research university are. The only references to academic requirements were to final exams, but in the context that the University food service provided what in the military I came to know as “midnight chow” served up late at night before finals the next day.

We were not taken to any facility where artistic performances of any type would be presented other than the movie theater in the student activities center.

We also did not see the football stadium although we heard many references to it and how we should all look forward to game Saturdays.

Nor did we tour the physical recreational activities building, although that was pointed out to us. In so doing the guide exclaimed that X was really a place for “jocks.” I did not ask her if she understood the male related aspects of that language which she was using generically.

Very late in the tour we got to the Library. We were only shown the foyer. But we were told that the library housed a student success center “upstairs” where students could receive free tutoring. At another point there was reference to a health center, but none to the availability of counseling, or the fact that the college experience might lead some students to seek counseling.

While there were multiple acknowledgements that students were coming to university to get jobs, strangely, we were never shown the career center. I am sure both students and families would have liked more attention to that,

actually, any attention to that.

At some point on the tour, I had this recollection of an experience I hadn't thought about in years, a pitch for a timeshare. It was probably about 30 years ago and I was over at the blue collar Riviera of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, literally on the beach. And I don't know what possessed me, but I agreed to attend a pitch for a timeshare—probably for ten beach dollars or something. As I recalled this otherwise forgettable experience I realized the similarities to this college admissions visit and tour. I was really being pitched a vacation experience, fun, recreation, generous and good food, plenty of entertainment, all in a safe environment, even free laundry thrown in. And not inexpensively—all for about what I could purchase a timeshare. Not only was what was being sold similar to the timeshare, so were the strategies being used in the pitch. This was truly déjà vu.

Of course, I know that those responsible at X for enrollment management are not trying to sell a timeshare. But assuming that what is said on these tours is not left to serendipity, and hence is carefully scripted, I had to wonder what was the rationale for what was covered/not covered. And without asking those responsible, all I could conclude was that this was the outcome of an exercise using Maslow's needs hierarchy into an operational process. So what we got was information on very basic shelter and security needs but nothing much higher up on the aspirational ladder towards self-actualization—unless we accept the proposition that these prospective students had no loftier aspirations than to spend four or five years in a resort as a way station before true adulthood. No, I don't think so. These students are high performing high school students. I believe they came in not knowing quite what to expect, but still expecting more than they got. I don't believe they are really aspiring to an extended resort stay.

So how does your place stack up in comparison? What is the pitch being given prospective students? What is/is not on the campus tour? Who writes the tour guides' script? Who trains and supervises them? What are the criteria for their selection? What is the story being told about your institution? Who is in charge of the front door to your institution? You need to know.

I must admit that for the three decades I was at the University of South Carolina I never went on the tour. I never heard the pitch. But I have now done so and am pleased to report it bears little similarity to X. I should have done this while I was employed full-time and had responsibility for first-year students. I knew very well what we were telling the students during Orientation but knew anything about the messaging that had preceded that. Shame on me.

The Gardner Institute Turns Sweet 16

10-21-15

How would my readers have known that October 18, 2015, was an important marker for a now prominent (he immodestly and un-objectively writes) non-profit US higher education organization, if I didn't tell you? Well, you wouldn't have. But, yes, the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education quietly turned 16 on October 18, 2015.

I write as a co-founder of the Institute. Our other founder, in this case the Founding Mother, is Dr. Betsy O. Barefoot. I am Betsy's husband. The Institute has given us both the opportunity to continue the work we began at the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition from 1986-99 but to take that work in new directions so as not to duplicate the work of the University's Center. That was the original vision for our work suggested by our initial philanthropic supporter and we have maintained it to the present.

Now we can apply for a driver's license. Using human development theory, I guess this means we are now in the full bloom of adolescence. We are not yet fully mature, and still discovering and developing our potential.

We were established in 1999 as the Policy Center on the First Year of College, through the generosity of The Pew Charitable Trusts, and its then Senior Higher Education Program Officer, Russell Edgerton. Russ was launching a number of projects in this same period all designed to, in his words, "increase institutional accountability for student learning." These projects included our Policy Center; and the National Survey for Student Engagement; the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program; and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges Quality Enhancement Program. We were and are in good company.

From 1999 through 2008 we were supported by grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Atlantic Philanthropies, Lumina Foundation for Education, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and USA Funds. It was the hope of these initial investors that our work would become valued by our higher education colleagues and that they would support our work going forward thus making it self sustaining. That vision has been accomplished.

Our grants were initially housed, as were we, under the fiscal agency of the Brevard College Corporation in Brevard, North Carolina. This was because Betsy Barefoot and I did not have our own 501c3 organization. In 2007, upon the recommendation of the auditor of Brevard College we were spun off and recreated as an autonomous 501c3, registered as the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. We have been functioning as such then for 8 years and have been supported by fees paid for our services by colleges and universities, overwhelmingly in the United States who engage in our processes and meetings to improve undergraduate excellence. We have been extremely fortunate to have the support of approximately 300 two and four-year colleges and universities which have engaged in one or more of our signature processes for improving undergraduate education.

A description of our work can be found on our website at www.ingi.org. While we engage in many customized improvement projects and meetings, we primarily provide three processes for increasing student success:

1. Foundations of Excellence ® First-Year and Transfer. This is a self-study, planning process to create a comprehensive plan to improve the entirety of the first-year or the transfer experience. High implementers of the FoE process have been shown to attain significant gains in first-to-second year retention. These two processes have been engaged in by 276 and 55 institutions respectively. See <http://www.ingi.org/foe-program/>.
2. Gateways to Completion, G2C. Begun in 2013 we are now in our third year of a national pilot with twelve institutions which undertake a comprehensive self study and improvement process of selected gateway

courses and then launch revisions of these courses which include the use of our predictive analytics processes. Preliminary results from these institutions are showing significant reductions in the rates of D,W,F,I grades and improved retention rates. Naturally, we are very excited about this promising intervention and are now recruiting our second national cohort and a state cohort in Georgia. See <http://www.jngi.org/q2c/>

3. Retention Performance Management, RPM. Started in Fall 2015 with eight colleges and universities and continuing with a second national cohort in Fall 2016. While we designed RPM originally for smaller, private institutions which may lack robust IR infrastructure, we are finding that multiple types of institutions are getting engaged including community colleges, regional comprehensive public universities, yes, small private colleges and even large public research universities. See <http://www.jngi.org/rpm/>

As we approach this milestone it is important for my readers to know that this work and the Institute's overall success are not totally reliant on the founding mother and father of the organization. Instead, there are ten of us who have the privilege of providing these services for higher education and our bio sketches can be found at: <http://www.jngi.org/staff/institute-staff/>

Collectively our work is governed by our Board of Directors whose biographical sketches can be found at: <http://www.jngi.org/staff/board-of-directors/>

Coming from my position as a tenured, full professor at a public, flagship, research university, to a soft money funded activity was for me a brave new world. When we started in October of 1999, all Betsy Barefoot and I knew was that we had a 14.5 month shelf life because that was the initial funding period from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Looking back, we acknowledge that we did not create the organization with an initial vision and plan for long-term institutionalization. That instead has occurred over the previous 16 years. Unlike my time at the University of South Carolina when I could count on some level of renewed funding from the legislature and students of South Carolina, each year in the Institute, we start again. There is no guaranteed funding and each day we have to earn our support and reputation. At times I think every tenured faculty member should experience this kind of existence as I have since I gave up my tenure with early retirement in 1999.

We sincerely thank all those who have believed and trusted in our work and thus made it possible and we look forward to a long-term future of service to the higher education community.

The Life and Times of Nelson Mandela: Who Are YOUR S/Heroes?

12-6-13

Nelson Mandela's death evokes so many thoughts and reactions on my part. And I think all of them apply to our work with college students today.

For my entire 32.5 year career of teaching undergraduates every term, I don't think I ever failed to work in some way into every course I taught the question posed to my students: "Who are your S/heroes?" It never failed to be provocative. The death of Mr. Mandela raises this question anew.

I was touched by the early reporting of his death to learn that our President Obama has a picture of President Mandela on his desk in the oval office. Do our students have pictures in their private spaces, including their smart phones, of any heroes?

My wife and I had our first and only opportunity to visit South Africa, three years ago this January. I think my most overriding memory was how frequently I heard mentioned over ten days time in that country a phrase I almost never hear mentioned in my own country now: "social justice." Unlike for us, social justice remains an ever present societal objective in that country.

Mandela's death, comes closely on the heels of the 50th anniversary of the assassination of one of my heroes, President Kennedy. Amazingly, Mandela did not die through assassination. So I have been recalling lately my own thoughts as a college student about my heroes of that time. I definitely had them. I knew who they were and how they were influencing me. I wish I could say the same for more of our college students today.

In recent years in my work on student success it is my sense that there is much greater attention being paid to the influence on students and student success, from mentoring, especially peer mentoring. It has become an accepted conclusion, research based, that the greatest influence on students is that of other students. I used to be amazed when I would hear students talk of their student mentors in near heroic terms. This no longer amazes me.

I believe it is very important for us to lead our students in structured analysis of and reflection on s/heroes. As I think about Mr. Mandela, in addition to his never changing single focused vision for a different kind of society, his courage, his perseverance, what strikes me as most noteworthy, is his belief in the power of reconciliation. Unlike so many tumultuous societal revolutions, the one he led did need lead to violence inflicted by the new regime against the ancient regime. His capacity for forgiveness and drive for reconciliation is unparalleled amongst my heroes.

The New Normal for “Night School”

11-3-09

I am in Boston which is of no consequence to any reader, but this reminds me of an attention grabbing story in The New York Times last week, page 1, above the fold, about a new meaning to “night school.” The focus of the story was on the huge influx of enrollment of students into community colleges and the resultant space capacity crunch and how some colleges were dealing with this by expanding hours of operation. As an illustration, Bunker Hill Community College in Boston is offering classes starting as late as 11:30 PM running until 2:30 AM. Other colleges are moving earliest class to 6:00 AM. So readers, how many of us were so committed to our own college experience that we would go at 11:30 at night or 6:00 AM in the morning to an academic event?!

So here I am in Boston where American higher education began in 1636 with the founding of Harvard, and where the ongoing refinement of higher education is taking still another new form. Given the low probability of increased government funding for higher education, this massive shift of students into the two-year sector will be the “new normal.”

This leads me to think of the resilience, the adaptability, the creativity, the necessity, of both our higher ed enterprise and our students. They need us more than ever. Our country needs them more than ever.

Personally, I admire the kind of thinking that went into the decisions to make higher ed available, literally at all costs, in any legitimate way, and the remarkable determination and courage of those seeking what we have to offer.

We have a great responsibility to such students, all our students. What a privilege to work with such brave new beginners. And we all have students like these.

Fifty Years Anniversary Posting—But Who's Counting? I Am!

1-28-17

Milestones, life markers, whatever we might want to call them, are important, for us professional higher educators and for our students. For those of us working with first-year students or seniors, the 2016-17 academic year would be very fitting to suggest to them as a life marker. You could encourage them to be noting some contrasts between world and national events, trends, and the major events of their lives, like starting college or preparing to graduate.

I had one of my own on January 10, 2017. That marked the fiftieth anniversary of my arrival in South Carolina and the commencement of my journey as a higher educator, a citizen in service to his country. I would never have dreamed on January 10th 1967 that any of the major events of my career would have taken place. Not that I was exactly a *tabula rasa*. I had been influenced and prepared by my own outstanding liberal arts education to take maximum advantage of opportunities that were both going to serendipitously present themselves to me and/or other opportunities that I created and seized the moment therein.

Commented [Office1]: (Locke's-the mind is a clean slate philosophy).

Once upon a time, on a mild, what passes for a winter night, in central South Carolina, I arrived on a Wednesday night, and checked in at my duty station: Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, South Carolina, and specifically the 363rd Tactical Hospital—not as a patient, but as the newest member of the hospital staff, a young, idealistic, mildly anxious, brand new psychiatric social worker. I had arrived in my Karman Ghia sports coupe with all my worldly goods inside, which mainly consisted of many of my books from college and graduate school; some of my college notebooks (yes, hard to believe, but I was so attached to them I had brought them along for the ride); my “record” collection (students today wouldn’t know what that means!); my uniforms; and some civilian clothing.

Commented [Office2]: May want to reword or remove as this is cool with college students now.

I had driven down from my parents’ home in New Canaan, Connecticut. Shortly after crossing over the South Carolina border I passed through two small towns, Latta, and Timmonsville, where I couldn’t possibly have imagined at that time, I would return time and time again to the homes of two different women that I married (in succession, not simultaneously).

When I signed in to the hospital an NCO told me to: “Relax. We don’t salute or wear hats in the hospital area and we don’t shine our shoes!” I would soon get an alternative directive from my first supervising psychiatrist (whom I now “Skype” with in New Zealand where he lives a saner life than is possible in the US) that I was to “spitshine” my shoes so that my career military patients could see their reflections in the shine on my shoes and thus feel more confident and comfortable in sharing their life histories with a very young looking social worker. My boss admonished me to look “military” and so I always wore freshly dry cleaned white medical uniforms to further inspire rapport. I don’t know whether or not the tactics worked, but they did really open up with me.

So the first day, not on campus, but on the base, it was *de rigueur* for the hospital squadron commander to call new personnel in for a welcome and orientation. This consisted of him bracing me at attention with a copy of my record open on his desk at which he continually glanced up and down. Soon he told me “Gardner, you will have more education than anyone in my squadron except for the doctors.” This included him but it was not evident at all that he held that against me. In fact, it was the basis for him giving me the gift of what is now my fifty-year professional life.

Commented [Office3]: added

He went on to say that because of my educational level (BA and MA at age 22 just 3 weeks short of my 23rd birthday) “This means you are going to perform community service.” I had only been in the Air Force for a little over three months in basic and officer training but I knew at least that the operative expected reply to any statement from a superior officer, regardless of gender, was “Yes Sir.”

But I knew I was free to ask a superior officer a question. So I asked him “But Sir, what does that mean?”

And he replied: “Gardner, it means you are going to do some college teaching.”

I was flabbergasted. It had never occurred to me to become a college teacher. I had only gone to graduate school to avoid the draft and had been drafted anyway. Then I volunteered for the Air Force to avoid the Army and the Air Force in its infinite wisdom and total control over my body, and mind, put me in its medical corps and sent me involuntarily to South Carolina, the last place in the US I wanted to be. I was a white, liberal, Connecticut Yankee, college grad and South Carolina was just 2.5 years beyond the Civil Rights Act. I had even volunteered for Vietnam in order to choose another duty station than in South Carolina. This process was known

as "The Dream Sheet." You got three choices. I chose Lakenheath England, Weisbaden Germany, and Vietnam. I got Sumer South Carolina. Go figure.

On the base everything was racially integrated. Cocktails were freely available and condoms were on highly visible display at the check-outs in the Base PX and food establishments. But the minute I drove off the base I entered a world of appalling segregation: schools, housing, movies, toilets, drinking fountains, the local hospital, restaurants that proclaimed "we reserve the right to refuse service to anyone"; doors into public buildings, etc. And here I was staring down at my squadron commander who happened to be an African American, who was about to exert the greatest influence on my life, short of my parents' decision to adopt me. And also off base, there were no legal cocktails served anywhere and no public display of condoms either.

So I continued my response to my commander: "Yes, Sir. But I am not a college teacher, Sir. I have never taught anything. I am a psychiatric social worker (which I had never done either!).

His response: "That's all right, Gardner. You will learn to be a college teacher. The Air Force needs college teachers to serve our on-base higher education program for our troops and we are desperate for qualified part-time faculty. This is South Carolina two years after the Civil Rights Act and we don't have an abundance of good teachers moving down here wanting to teach. The Air Force needs you to do this. You will do this. You have a day shift job and you are —you were— free—in the evenings and now you will be teaching in the evenings."

What else could I say but "Yes, Sir!"

He immediately sent me to the Base Education Office where the Base Education Officer also reviewed my transcripts (as had my commander who obviously was impressed by my grades at the beginning of the alphabet) and so this officer immediately called somebody at the University of South Carolina, 42 miles to the west, which was the provider of the college courses on the base to make an appointment to see me. I was then ordered to report to the University 48 hours later on Saturday, January 13, to have my credentials officially reviewed. In that era most colleges and universities had Saturday classes.

I drove into Columbia two days later and was interviewed by multiple administrators. The Sociology chair approved me to teach Sociology 101. The history chair (whom I met in his apartment and learned that he was a member of the extended "Ochs" family, the founders of The New York Times) approved me to teach four different courses: US and Western Civilization History. I told him that I had a mail subscription of the daily and Sunday Times sent to me at the base. I later learned that I was the only member of my squadron who engaged in such a practice. I had been doing this since I was a first-year student in college as The Times was not allowed by my father in our house who viewed it as Communist influenced paper!

In my closing interview that Saturday a senior administrator told me that I had been approved to teach these five courses and that there was a need for me to start teaching two weeks later at a campus in a town I had never heard of, Lancaster. It was a small, rural, regional campus that had been started in 1959; and all the students were either textile mill workers or the children of those mill workers. I didn't know it then but I would be teaching at that campus when it admitted its first African American student whom I would have in my class.

I told this Dean that I couldn't possibly begin teaching in two weeks, that I had never taught anything and that I needed at least six months to prepare a course. His response: "Mr. Gardner, anything that comes out of your mouth will educate those students!" I was astonished at such cynicism, but agreed to accept the appointment. Sixteen years later in 1983 I went to work for this same officer as Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for the University's five regional, two-year campuses. How could I have possibly foreseen this on Saturday, January 13, 1967?

The basis on which I accepted my first teaching assignment was that I teach the course from 7.30-10.00 on Friday nights. The campus was so desperate for an adjunct faculty member that they agreed to it. My choice of Friday nights was driven by the fact that the campus was 65 miles from my base and that teaching on any other night of the week would have had me returning back to the base very late at night and I needed my beauty rest to be at the top of my game when I started seeing my patients at 7.30AM the next morning. And I didn't see patients on Saturday so that was the deal. I must confess that most nights after my Friday evening class, I would go out drinking with my students! I dropped that practice pretty early in my career.

Within a few months though, I was also teaching two courses per night, 5.30-7.30 and 7.45-9.45, two nights a week per eight weeks for every Monday/Wednesday and Tuesday/Thursday sequence on the base itself with

Commented [Office4]: m-change to me

military students. And on Friday nights I had my civilian students in the textile mill town. And on Saturday morning I taught at a regional hospital for student nurses who needed Sociology 101 in a place called Orangeburg; I would be teaching there about 18 months later one evening in February 1968 when the bodies of 33 African American students were brought into that hospital, ~~three~~ dead, 30 wounded, all shot in the back by SC Highway Patrolmen while the students were peacefully demonstrating the continuing segregation of a bowling alley. This event subsequently became known in American history as: The Orangeburg Massacre.

Commented [Office5]: spelled out

Yes, it is now fifty years. My wife, Betsy Barefoot, whom I recently regaled with my fiftieth anniversary memories, is amazed at the detail of my recollections.

Ok I started teaching then, first week in February 1967. Friday nights. My students were NOT happy about having to be there on a Friday night. I was not initially happy either. Instead, I was initially quite anxious. So much so I would say I was having a mild "adult situational reaction" which is a diagnostic category straight out of the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for that year! Yes, I was anxious—and for good reason not having ever taught before and not knowing anything about the culture or lifestyles of my students and being only one week ahead of my students in terms of preparation.

And I looked so young. Had no hair. So some nights I wore my uniform to compensate. My students were so respectful. So polite. They addressed me as "Sir" almost like they were in the military too. I was so anxious on those first few Friday nights I couldn't eat before class.

But after about six weeks my symptoms abated and I began to feel more comfortable about coming to class. In fact, I had to admit to myself that I was excited about coming to class. I looked forward to it. It was the highlight of the week.

And there it was, the most important epiphany of my life: I had discovered my vocation, my calling, my purpose in life. And all thanks to the United States Air Force and the University of South Carolina. What was the epiphany? It was that I realized that college teaching was permitting me to do simultaneously the four things I loved the most to do in life. 1) talking—and to "talk" in front of a class, I had to do----2) reading. I had always been a reader. I loved to read. I had not been raised on television because my parents refused to have one as long as they had children in the home. 3) writing—after reading I wrote notes for delivery in class. I loved to write. And I was pretty good at it; and most important of all 4) helping people. And there it was: my adult profession in which I got to do talking, reading, writing, and helping people—and to get paid for it to boot. I had never imagined that I could earn a legal living, and one with redeeming social value, where I would be paid for doing those four things I loved to do.

After finishing my tour in the Air Force I was an instructor of history at Winthrop College in Rock Hill, South Carolina for two years. Was terminated there for my liberal civil rights activities. Lucked out, again, and immediately was offered an appointment at the University of South Carolina. Spent the next thirty years there moving up through all the faculty ranks from adjunct instructor to Distinguished Professor; and the same with administrative ranks from program director, national center founder and executive director and vice chancellor for academic affairs. Initiated an international reform movement to change the way higher education introduces students to higher education—and other crusades too.

And it all started 50 years ago. I feel like I have been on an adventure. I have been. And am still on it. Not quite sure where it is going now because I am not sure where my country is going. I never had a traditional lock step game plan and still don't. But I did have a few great original ideas that made a difference. And I owe all of these life marker events to the Air Force, which taught me the importance of "service." Nobody had ever said to me in college that I needed to perform "service." Hard for me to imagine that now. Surely most of all us talk to our students about the importance of performing service, of what college graduates owe our country. But I was almost 23 and no one in authority had ever said that to me before until that African American commander of mine in the Air Force.

What are the lessons from my life that I would share with my students? They are legion:

1. Let college prepare you for the unknown
2. Be open to new possibilities
3. Take healthy and appropriate risks
4. Obey authority figures who give you legal and moral directives
5. Yes, you do have an obligation to serve others
6. Life is a journey. Make the most of it.

7. Try your best to leave your community, employing organization, country, a little better than you found them.
8. And, oh so much more.

Happy anniversary John. You made it this far. Who knows what else you might be able to accomplish?

Why Chief Academic Officers Matter (and Now More Than Ever)

2-4-17

Since January 20 I have been thinking even more about what kind of leaders we have on campus as compared to our government. In that vein, my wife, Betsy Barefoot and I just attended the annual winter meeting of the chief academic officers of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Spending several days with those outstanding men and women reminded me of how important a role that of CAO is and I want to remind my readers here of why that is the case. We need and will be looking to these leaders in this coming year more than ever. I do this also in the spirit of a book that Betsy and I are the co-authors of, along with Peter Felten, Leo Lambert, and Charles Schroeder, published this past May: *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most*. The Chief Academic Officer is.....

1. The protector of and advocate for the faculty
2. The chief developer of the institution's most important resource: its faculty
3. The primary driver for attainment of the academic mission and core values
4. The primary guarantor of institutional academic quality
5. The principal advocate for student success
6. The leader for integration of academic and student affairs' roles
7. The principal convener for innovation in student success
8. The primary driver for academic continuous quality improvement
9. The primary shaper of faculty rewards' systems
10. The primary leader who keeps the CEO out of trouble
11. The primary internally focused leader
12. The primary protector from the corporatization of the institution
13. The leader who hires the deans and department chairs who hire and lead the faculty
14. The primary academic change agent
15. The primary academic resource allocator
16. The primary custodian of academic freedom

My thoughts on the above should be credible. They were forged during my own stint as Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for the University of South Carolina's five Regional Campuses from 1983-96. I'm not sure I always met the test of my 16 points above but I did my best. My current status as a recovering former CAO and now CEO of a higher education related non-profit organization makes me much better at my current job, of that I am positive!

Good Things Will Come from Campus Unrest: They Have Before

2/4/17

In May of 1992, my former and still cherished University of South Carolina colleague, Stuart Hunter and I, co-hosted along with James Griffith, the chief students affairs officer, an International Conference on the First-Year Experience at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. There, we were approached by an educator whose request to me now seems almost prophetic in light of what has been happening on a number of American campuses since January 20.

Her name was Elsie Watt and she introduced herself as a doctoral student in US social history at Queens University, Ontario, one of Canada's most elite universities. She explained to us that she was looking for a dissertation topic that could grow out of the history of US campus social protest movements in the late 1960's/early 70's. She had just learned by attending a session Stuart and I had done that the University of South Carolina's highly regarded and widely emulated first-year seminar course, University 101, had been born out of the convergence of the civil rights/voting rights/students rights and anti-war movements—in the US in general and at the University of South Carolina in particular. She went on to seek our formal permission to visit the University to conduct research for a dissertation that would trace the historical origins of the course University 101 to ascertain its connections and impetus to the social protest movements. So she spent the better part of two years with us in South Carolina in the University archives, in my papers, and in interviewing scores of University officials who had been involved in any way with responding to the social protest movement which by that time was 20 years distant in time. She did complete her dissertation on this topic and its findings have long served as a reminder to me of the positive outcomes that did come about from the period of campus turmoil, a significant part of which revolved around antipathy for two US Presidents in succession: Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Yes, you are assuming correctly: a number of us senior (reference to age not rank) higher educators have been experiencing Déjà vu since January 20—and as Yogi Berra so famously said: "Déjà vu all over again!"

I am exhibit A of a higher educator whose life was profoundly altered by the social protest movement. Because of the Vietnam War, I was drafted and sent to South Carolina on active duty. It was the Air Force that gave me a direct order to become an adjunct faculty member in my off-duty time. I lost my first higher education faculty job because of my involvement in social protest activities (with the ACLU); that, in turn, led to my faculty position, thank goodness, at the University of South Carolina, three months after a tumultuous student riot had shaken the campus. One outgrowth of the riot was the President's action to ask the faculty to create what became the University 101 course, to teach the students, in his words, "to love the University." It was his thesis that we could teach this and that if we were successful they would not want to or need to riot again. And they haven't since the course was created in 1972. I acknowledge that this is correlation and not causation. The social protest movement then further impacted me because I became the first faculty director of this initiative to prevent student riots, a position I held for 25 years.

I think it is important for all of us in higher education as we face the uncertainty of how we are going to deal with challenges of unrest on our campuses and the likely political pressure on many of us to stifle our opposition to government actions, to remember that the last time our country faced significant student protest, there were many positive outcomes! I admit it: I am looking for some upside to the changes we are going through.

So what were some of those outcomes of the social protest movement the last time we really had one:

- The students were a definite contributing factor to ending the war in Vietnam. That for me is the most important outcome of all.
- Student opposition to the expansion of the Vietnam buildup started by President Kennedy and greatly ramped up by President Johnson, contributed significantly to his decision not to seek reelection in 1968. Could students possibly bring down a President again?

- Student opposition to the war and the related draft for conscription, contributed to the Congressional action to end the draft.
- Student objections to the presence of ROTC, Reserve Officer Training Corps, programs on campuses led to a profound rethinking of this opportunity on college campuses.
- Student demands for greater participation in institutional shared governance were heard and met. We now all have students serving on important committees and some of us work in institutions where there is even a student member on the institutional governing board.
- Student demands for the ending of gender-based separate social and conduct regulations were met demanding the end of separate and definitely not equal privileges that had created inequities of practices like curfews for women but not men.
- Student demands for increased opportunities for participation in intercollegiate athletics were met.
- Student demands for greater sensitivity to the needs of formerly de jure discriminated against students of color contributed to a myriad of new forms of academic support and efforts at greater inclusion.
- Student demands for greater freedoms of assembly and free speech effected profound change in campus cultures.
- Student activism was one of the many contributing factors to the growth of the Student Affairs profession as campus leaders recognized they needed far more educators "living over the store" with the students. It's a foolish campus CEO who doesn't listen to her/his Student Affairs colleagues sense of the student pulse on campus today.
- Student activism also profoundly impacted the extent of faculty-student interaction outside the classroom including and often especially within our most esteemed research universities.

I am not going to undertake here a thorough, let alone scholarly, treatise of my thesis. This is not the forum for that kind of discourse. And I have only gotten started on my above list.

As I listen to and read about my fellow higher education leaders struggling to find the most appropriate responses to both their and our students concerns about the state of American political actions and discourse, I take heart by remembering that we rose to the occasion once before in the 1960's and 70's and I believe that we will again. I just hope it doesn't take a war to generate a new anti-war movement. I am too old to be drafted this time, but not too old to serve in other ways the best interests of our democracy.

Returning the Gift: Never Know What a Student Can Do Unless You...

2-6-17

I have just completed fifty years of being, proudly, a higher educator, a profession that our society needs more than ever to teach students how to discern the difference between facts and "alternative facts." All of us in the profession are constantly exposed to unproven students who need us to invest in them. How do we know what they can do? What they can amount to in life? We can't unless we give them a chance...

Thankfully, I learned this fifty years ago, right after I arrived at my permanent base in the United States Air Force and about a week before I started teaching my first class. I met someone that I made a bet on, that I "invested" in, literally, and wow, it has really paid off. I will explain. I think of this former student so often as a reminder of what my work is all about. It helps too that he and I are still in regular communication.

So I had only been on my base for a couple of weeks, arriving January 10, 1967. And this former student, Raymond O. Booth, arrived on January 27. He also was assigned to the 363rd Tactical Hospital at Shaw AFB where all the hospital staff ate in what was referred to as "the chow hall." We were a small squadron and it was easy to get to know everyone regardless of rank differences. Even the physicians fraternized with enlisted personnel and esprit de corps was very high.

It didn't take long for all of us in the squadron to take notice of this guy. He was the shortest by far, had a loud, high, voice which almost sounded pre-pubescent. He looked kind of like the cartoon strip character Dennis the Menace and he even had a blond cowlick sticking up on the rear of his head as did the infamous Dennis! He definitely did not look military. We all could hear him the minute he entered the chow hall greeting all like his long lost extended tribe. There was consensus that he was the funniest person any of us had ever met. And the patients loved him. He was a medic who worked OB-GYN. His MO was to practice what he called "happiness therapy" and he was so good at uplifting the spirits of his patients that they complained to his supervisors when they gave him a day off. He had another skill all of us admired: he could come to the very edge of mocking his superiors, including the hospital commander, but doing so under the camouflage of humor. Even the brass loved his calculated insolence. He was truly the Hospital's Everyman.

And I, who never met a stranger, sought him out and frequently sat with him in the chow hall. I learned how bright he was. Underlying any skillful humor has to be the gifts of intelligence and insight. I learned that he was from a rural town in north central Ohio, one of ten children. His parents had no college education. Father was a steelworker. No one in the family had ever been to college. Raymond was a high school graduate, and amazingly given his size, a former football player. The guy certainly had more courage than I did. He had never been anywhere. Had never seen any ocean, which he finally saw for the first time while stationed in South Carolina. I know because I had never met anyone who had not seen an ocean and I wanted to see how he reacted so I drove him over. He uttered unprintable exclamations.

Most of all I knew about him that he was really smart, and a really gifted communicator. So given my biases I inquired as to why he hadn't gone to college after high school graduation. He told me: "Oh, I could never have gone to college—no member of my family has ever gone to college. We don't do college!" He didn't know it but he had laid down the opportunity gauntlet with me.

So I kept working on him about going to college. I told him that there was a college program right on base offered by the University of South Carolina for troops just like him. And better still, the Air Force paid 75% of the student's tuition. But he told me he couldn't afford the 25%. He also had a lot of other "reasons" why he couldn't do college. For example, he thought he wasn't intelligent enough. I used my best logic and psychiatric social worker skills to neutralize all his forms of resistance, all but the tuition cost.

Finally, I said to him: "OK Raymond, what would you say if I paid the other 25%? But you have to make at least a B. And once you do I will fund a second course and so on." Of course he was flabbergasted and said he could not allow me to do that. I told him I could and would.

Back story here was that during college I had really angered my parents. I had gotten into a living arrangement with a young woman of whom they did not approve. To both punish me and try to motivate me out of the error of my ways, they cut my allowance from \$100 a month to \$50 a month, a real hardship. I happened to share this with the mother of one of my friends. And she immediately insisted on giving me \$50 right then and there and told me to always carry that fifty-dollar bill on my person "for emergencies!" and that she would mail me a fifty dollar check every month thereafter for the balance of my time in college. And she did. The most important aspect of this arrangement was her insisting I make a pledge not to repay her but to someday do the same kind of thing for

someone else. This deal was made in the fall of 1963 and I found a way to repay it in the spring of 1967 with Raymond O. Booth.

Some footnotes: I broke off the relationship my parents objected to the end of that school year; my parents restored my allowance for the following year. And I sold my car at the end of that year and gave the proceeds to my benefactor who had told me she did not want me to repay her. Even though she accepted the repayment she told me it did not let me out of her original deal obligating me to return the gift to someone else.

OK, back to Raymond Booth. He did agree to my deal. And he took his first course—actually, from me. He earned a B in the course. He took three more courses in succession at Shaw AFB, which I underwrote. Then the Air Force shipped him to the Philippines and he was on his own thereafter.

After his four-year Air Force tour was over he took his 60 or so college credits earned by that time and transferred to a private college near his Ohio home town and finished his bachelor's degree, with a great deal of assistance from his new wife, Holly. I attended their wedding in December of 1971. He joined his wife in the profession of public school teaching in Ohio where he taught middle school children for over 30 years. He also earned another degree, a masters. And he was a MASTER teacher. He was a dramatic storyteller, classroom performer, lover of his students and calling.

What a wonderful investment I made. He was the first of my students I invested in—in all the ways one could invest. He was the only student though for whom I provided the initial seed money other than my two children. Wow did he return the gift. And so did I.

So you never know what a student can do, unless you.....

- *give them a chance, a break, like surely you must have had

- *return your gifts

- *communicate high expectations

- *reiterate those high expectations

- *address each of the factors that are inhibiting their getting started

- *challenge and support

- *let them know you will hang in there with them forever

- *allow each student to teach you a lesson

I was so thankful to learn early in my career what dividends are paid for the giver and the receiver—and society—when we give students a chance.

Coming... a World Boycott?

2-11-17

I have recently attended the 36th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. One of my great joys in life, professionally and personally, is this annual renewal learning experience. I am the founder of this conference series now 36 years running as the title states. This series of meetings until recent years was also hosted periodically in countries outside the US. At this year's meeting there were over 1700 attendees from just over 20 countries. The attention to the first year is truly an international movement.

As I interacted at this meeting I found myself expressing special gratitude to educators who had come to the meeting from outside the country, at a time in our history when our new Presidential administration was attempting to impose a ban on entry into the United States who were members of a particular religious denomination. Not only did I want to thank these non US educators for coming to our suddenly less hospitable country, I also found my embarrassment about our change of official posture extremely embarrassing.

One of the things I have enjoyed the most over these past 36 years is all the wonderful friendships I have made with like minded higher educators from all over the world, all of whom are working to increase the success of first-year students.

During the conference I received an e-mail from one such former international colleague whose message I am now going to excerpt and quote from where my correspondent is describing a trip he and his wife have been planning to the American southwest in late February, 2017:

".....We are driving south on Feb.20...a few days in Palm Springs then to Scottsdale for a week and then a week in Las Vegas. We are driving back via Utah and then across to Portland via the Columbia Gorge. We will take about 5 weeks to complete our trip depending on weather. We seriously considered cancelling but because we are meeting my sister and brother-in-law in Arizona we decided to continue. We have decided that this will be our last trip to the US for several years. Our attitude towards the US has turned pretty negative and it is as if we are turning against what we believe in from a moral perspective if we continue to travel there. Even though there are lots of great people there and friends like yourself, we will not be going south of the border after this trip.

Many of our friends feel the same way. Unfortunately the US has gone from one of the greatest countries in the world to one of the least respected. Our lives won't change and neither will our decision to avoid the US change the direction your country is headed.....but we will feel better. Our future travel will focus on Canada and perhaps Portugal or Spain. We would love to see the Republicans wake up and act responsibly but I do not think that will happen...

Glad to hear that the FYE conferences are still going strong. I certainly enjoyed working them with you

We just heard from friends in Michigan who have lived there for 32 years that their house is up for sale and they are moving to Victoria ASAP. They have a daughter living in Toronto whom they visit frequently. The attitude of the border guards has changed drastically.....in a very negative way....and they are sick of listening to their unsolicited comments.....

We have heard that Sarah Palin is a possible candidate as US Ambassador to Canada.....hope this does not happen because she is a joke and an insult to the entire political field...

Best wishes.....

As I think about the implications of what the message communicated, I think I feel coming on a world-wide boycott of discretionary tourist travel into the United States. This is really going to hurt.

Tenure: Look to Those Who Have It

2-4-17

This will be a brief piece inviting a focus on, recognition of, those on your campus who are so fortunate to have tenure. We are going to be looking to them more than ever for the leadership we need from them from their privileged vantage point with the protection of tenure.

For as long as I have been a member of the academy as a professional, there have been debates in the non-academic world about whether tenure is necessary or appropriate. And currently the question is being raised again. I was a tenured professor, from 1976-1999 at the University of South Carolina, with the majority of those years being at the highest faculty rank for my last 23 years. Since 1999 I am Distinguished Professor Emeritus, and the CEO of a non-profit organization in which I do not have tenure either as an employee or President, but rather a rolling three-year contract. I remember what it was like when I was a faculty member without tenure. In fact, in my first academic job, non-tenure eligible, I was not renewed because of my activities in a small South Carolina city initiating a local chapter of the ACLU and for suing several prominent local parties. Not smart John. I was quickly dispatched.

Once I had earned tenure I found on several matters that I needed it. One had to do with stances I took which our all-powerful Athletic Department found to be unfriendly in terms of my unwillingness to engage in certain practices for first-year student athletes. There were a few very powerful people that became very unhappy with me over my stance related thereto. And then there was my administrative coordination of a module in the University 101 course called "Sex and the College Student." The University president got so many complaints about that from parents that a form letter was developed in response. Without tenure, I would have been really vulnerable, the educational legitimacy of using pro-active preventive education to combat the spread of the AIDS virus notwithstanding. One of our finest hours as a faculty occurred, I thought, when one of our Provosts stood up to a huge campaign mounted by thousands of right wing zealots to deny a gay faculty member a promotion. This professor, the author of a book titled *Growing Up Gay in the South*, had offended many on the right by his offering of a special topics course for professional K-12 leaders on the theme of "how to combat the religious right." Admittedly, not too subtle or diplomatic. But the administration stood its ground and didn't give in and he was promoted to full professor. And then there was the time a group of tenured faculty, including yours truly, took an official stand against a move being driven by a member of the Board of Trustees as a cost saving initiative to outsource our campus custodians. Problem: most of these employees were African Americans with less power than any sub group on campus. Had they been outsourced they would have lost the same health and other benefits that I enjoyed by virtue of my relative privilege. My colleagues regarded this potential as immoral and unacceptable in a just community. We stood up for them and the move to outsource them was blocked. Tenure does matter.

Of course, none of us can look at our careers, present or past, with total objectivity. But it is my own personal self-assessment that I never abused my tenure. I used it to take stands to advocate for students needs and best interests and to enable me to offer respectfully my counsel to my superiors with total honesty and without fear of reprisal should my opinions differ from theirs. One of the criticisms of tenure is that it protects a class of drones whose productivity decreases upon the award of this privilege. In my case I am positive that any external review of my record would conclude that I was more "productive" after receiving tenure than before its granting. And that is also true of most all of the tenured colleagues I have known throughout my career.

So here we are now, several weeks into a new presidential administration and in a sea of vast uncertainty as we all try to chart our responses. It does seem clear that the academy will be under a microscope and that we will be attacked. It is even more certain that we will be dealing with distressed students and having to make choices about how we respond to their protests, for and against actions taken by the new administration.

The times ahead are definitely going to call for courage and risk taking, particularly in the public higher education sector that is dependent on state legislative funding from legislatures the majority of which are now

under the control of the political party that is most likely to retaliate against those of us they perceive as being inappropriately "liberal." I predict that our untenured colleagues will be looking much more closely at those of us who are tenured to take the stands that our untenured colleagues can only dream of taking. They will want us to stand up and be counted. They will want us to own our power. They will say if we who are tenured don't speak up, then who can? I write in this vein because I think it is very important that those of us who have tenure be aware that our less powerful and secure colleagues will be watching carefully how we exercise our leadership and academic freedom.

For those of us who do not have tenure, I hope you will be letting those of us who do, what you expect of us, what you need from us.

My wife, Betsy Barefoot, and my long-time colleague at the University of South Carolina, Mary Stuart Hunter, have been facilitating once a year at the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience, a session entitled "Spirituality, Authenticity and Wholeness in Higher Education" since 1998. This session has become a perennial favorite for colleagues of all ranks and roles who have come together out of their commitment to enhance first-year student success, to share how they are dealing in their home campus settings with the challenge of incongruity between individual values and those espoused by the highest levels of institutional leadership. A theme that we have been hearing for almost twenty years now is the desire for more conversation on campus, encouraged and framed by campus leaders, about what matters most. This involves risk taking that is best taken, now, more than ever, by those with tenure.

Please remind your tenured colleagues of their obligation to fulfill this kind of leadership expectation. I don't need to be reminded but many of us do.

The Transfer Experience vs The First-Year Experience: How Do They Measure Up? Here's a Simple Toolkit to Answer This Question.

2-23-17

I have just returned from a stimulating professional development experience, the 15th annual National Conference on Transfer, hosted by the NISTS, the National Institute for the Study of the Transfer Student. NISTS is located at the University of North Georgia. Founded by Dr. Bonita Jacobs, their President at UNG, this work was originally birthed when she was the chief students affairs officer at the University of North Texas. The meeting has been held each year in late January/February windows in either Dallas or Atlanta. Next year it will be in Atlanta again, February 7-9.

I am interested in the transfer student experience for multiple reasons:

1. as a national higher education system, our performance with them in terms of getting them to BA degree attainment has been miserable.
2. Transfer is now the normative route to the bachelor's degree.
3. My finding and contention is that transfer is still relatively low status—that is what I am writing about here.
4. Earlier in my career at the University of South Carolina I was the founder of a conference founded in 1995 and still going strong; "Students in Transition" which features a track on transfer students. The next meeting will be held in Costa Mesa, CA, October 21-23, 2017. <http://sc.edu/fye/>
5. The non-profit organization (<http://www.jngi.org>) I lead has been trying to make a dent in this low priority since we launched in 2010 our Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus process (<http://www.jngi.org/foe-program/transfer-focus/>), an assessment and planning initiative to provide for institutions a comprehensive plan to improve transfer—which few campuses have and all need. We have engaged sixty institutions in this work: 24 four-year and 36 two-year colleges and universities.
6. Our non-profit Gardner Institute is also a current recipient of a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation planning grant to plan new work to integrate into high failure rate gateway courses taken by transfers digital learning components and pedagogies.

So all of the above lines of interest coalesced and brought me to this excellent transfer conference, February 15-17 for my second experience in this meeting.

In my work on transfer student success I have several dominant lenses in which I view the current status of transfers.

The first is that I see the level of attention and priority paid to transfer students as being about what that level of attention and priority was towards first-year students in the early 1980's.

And second, and the subject of this posting, is that I am so struck by the inequities that are experienced by transfer students.

So just undertake with me a relatively brief and simple comparison of these two populations and especially how we in the academy go about treating them. A way to do this is to use what the Gardner Institute calls in its work a "policy analysis"....basically an inventory of the policies that are directed towards transfer students and which can be used to compare with comparable policies for first-year students. Consider then the relative policies applying to first-year versus transfer students for:

1. Application deadlines for admission.
2. Capacity for slots in any given academic term
3. Financial aid awards—institutional monies, need versus merit based, special awards for first-year versus transfer students—amounts and eligibility guidelines

4. Continued eligibility for such awards after first year of enrollment
5. Eligibility for on-campus residential accommodations
6. Application deadlines for housing
7. Priority for allocation of available spaces in housing
8. Eligibility for participation in student organizations, clubs, teams, student government, etc.
9. Eligibility for leadership positions in student organizations.
10. Allocation for admission slots into high demand majors
11. Registration priority and deadlines
12. Availability of student organizations devoted to supporting this cohort
13. Availability of special orientation and advising initiatives to support this cohort
14. Availability of college/student success-first-year seminars for this population
15. Stipulations that certain forms of student support be required versus optional for these populations
16. The existence on the campus of a high level academic officer with specific responsibility for the welfare of this cohort
17. In like manner, the existence of an advocate, champion at the institutional level, for the needs of this population, other than and beyond processing by Enrollment Management
18. In like manner, an advocate at the academic unit in decentralized universities
19. The priority for making available "High Impact Practices"
20. The availability of such curricular cohorts as learning communities
21. Availability of opportunities for on-campus employment
22. Availability of opportunities for internships, practicum experiences and study abroad (with financial aid support)
23. Internal systems of accountability for retention and graduation rates for this population
24. A priority for addressing needs of this population as expressed in the institution's strategic plan
25. Being on the priority list and attention agenda for senior leaders and spokespersons.
26. A priority for gathering, analyzing, discussing institutional research data

And I am sure the above list is not an exhaustive inventory.

My prediction is that if you undertake such comparisons, you will find the transfer student cohort has drawn a very short stick. And that is our biggest challenge.

And as a mirror of low campus priority, and in part a cause of this lower priority, is the fact that the US Department of Education does not count transfer students in its IPEDS (Integrated Post Secondary Educational Data System) model for measuring retention and graduation rates.

And hence the media's ranking processes for institutional prestige, especially USNWR, also does not "count" these students.

So, if you buy my thesis and model here, what might we do to move the transfer experience further along to more closely approximate the status now of "the first-year experience?"

Ah, that calls for another blog posting, actually multiple postings, given that has been the focus of my work since the early 1980's.

In the meantime, please try your version of the policy audit toolkit described above. And then act on your findings. Be prepared to have your notions of equity and social justice challenged when you remember just who these transfer students are when compared to first-year, first-time, full-time students.

I was not a transfer student and I'm glad I wasn't. In my case, this was the luck of the draw as the adopted person I am. I was a second-generation college student, fully supported by affluent parents. If I had been a transfer student, I might not be where I am today given the biases then, let alone now, in our higher education system. But it doesn't have to be this way.

The Beginning College Experience: What Could An Engaged Board Be Doing About This?

4-1-17

(NOTE: THIS BLOG POSTING WAS WRITTEN AT THE REQUEST OF AND WAS INITIALLY PUBLISHED BY AGB, THE ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS)

The blog commentary is from a former struggling first-year student who became an international authority on improving the beginning college experience, and also a twelve-year veteran college trustee! This piece will briefly examine why trustees should invest any governance time and energy considering the issue of the first-year, and then if they did, what should they know and what could they do.

Trustees should care about the first year because...

The beginning college experience relates to and is arguably the foundation for addressing many of the issues that trustees care most about, and ultimately have fiduciary responsibility for:

- *student learning and satisfaction
- *institutional academic and financial viability and stability
- *retention/graduation rates and prestige rankings
- *expectations for student behaviors in and out of the curriculum
- *athletic success
- *student safety
- *student abuse of alcohol
- *success and behaviors of fraternity and sorority members
- *town/gown relations
- *the baseline for assessment of outcomes which is mandatory to maintain your institution's regional accreditation
- *and many more!

The first year of college isn't working as well for many of our campuses now as when many trustees were first-year students themselves. This poses the challenge for trustees of empathy for and understanding of what both students and educators experience as challenges with first-year students. There are many, many factors influencing outcomes of the first year, but most notably the changing demographics of American higher education, declining family incomes coupled with rising costs, under-preparedness, and a host of other variables that interfere with student success. Bottomline: today's higher education institutions weren't created for the majority of the students we now serve. We continue to struggle to adapt, but we aren't moving fast enough. College worked well for our generation, not so well now.

Thank goodness, the success of first-year students is now a much higher priority for many campuses than it was three to four decades ago. There is now a widespread movement to enhance what is generically called "student success" especially in what has been called since the early 1980's: "the first-year experience." And also thankfully, there is now available a great deal of research on first-year students whose attrition rates are the highest and on interventions that purport to address these retention challenges.

So what do trustees need to know about?

You need to be continually updated on, especially:

- *the characteristics of your student populations, in the aggregate and in key sub populations
- *what are your trend lines in these characteristics and which students are you more/less successful with, and why?
- *what actions are you undertaking not only to recruit students but to retain them (and proportionately what investments do you make related thereto—many colleges spend far more to recruit than to retain students)?
- *what is your organizational structure for addressing these challenges and who is responsible?

*what are your retention and graduation rates, in the aggregate and as a function of race, gender, ethnicity, first generation status, Pell eligibility, residential versus nonresidential status, athletic participation status?

*how does your institution orient students (and by whom?), generate expectations in students for performance levels?

*how is academic and career advising provided to new students and by whom?

*what evidence is there of effectiveness for first-year student focused interventions?

*what are the patterns of awarding of D,W,F,I grades for students classified as first-year, in so-called "gateway courses, and how do these grades correlate with: mode of instruction; rank/classification of instructor; demographic characteristics of students; and retention rates to the following year?

*how are faculty, academic/student affairs/student success personnel working together to address these challenges?

*how does paying more attention to first-year students connect in any ways to the rewards systems for faculty and staff?

What could trustees do about the issue of underperformance of first-year students?

This is the least complicated part of the equation. It's very simple really. Engaged boards could and should:

- show an interest in this topic; make it a board priority; talk about it
- have this discussed in multiple standing committees: academics/enrollment management/finance/athletics
- consider having improvement in first-year student outcomes be incorporated into metrics for evaluating and compensating your CEO
- request from your administration a study of the first year with a report to the Board
- participate in discussion or focus groups with first-year students and those educators who work with them

Of all the issues cited in this piece, the one you should be paying the most attention to is what I refer to as "American higher education's best kept dirty little secret": outcomes in high D,W,F,I grade rate "gateway" courses. When you get to the bottom of this you will know where your students are not being successful, and you will have a focus for what to do about it! These courses are the REAL "first-year experience."

The Big Disconnects

4-1-17

Recently I was privileged to be part of a five-person author team to both have a book published and to do a presentation on the main ideas of this book as a "featured session" at the annual meeting of the Higher

Learning Commission, our nation's largest regional higher education accreditor, in Chicago, on April 1, 2017. No joke. Not about April Fool's Day.

The book is *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most*; Peter Felten, John Gardner, Leo Lambert, Charles Schroeder, and Betsy Barefoot; Jossey-Bass, 2016.

Our leaders for this project, Peter Felten and Leo Lambert, Professor of History and President, respectively, of Elon University, prepared questions for each of us authors to speak to in this session. I want to share below one of the questions that was directed to me and the answer that I prepared in advance to offer.

If the same question were put to you, I wonder what your response would be about "The Big Disconnects."

John, our book is filled with example after example of uplifting good practices across a wide spectrum of institutions. We know what constitutes good practice. And yet we know hundreds of institutions are beset with shockingly low graduation rates, very poor retention rates, and are revolving doors of failure. You have been in this business for more than forty years. What are the big disconnects in American higher education?

THE BIG DISCONNECTS:

- Colleges not designed for students we now have.
- Faculty rewards system not designed to reward/motivate what majority of students need most—more focus on teaching and availability to students
- Students preferred learning styles not in sync with ways majority of faculty teach
- Focus on retention has lead to focus on the margins: not the heart of the academic experience, gateway courses, where we have the greatest number of student failures.
- Faculty viewed as source/cause of many problems rather than the solution
- Our values are the big disconnect: we have adopted larger societal corporate values and more of our thinking is about making money than making----
- Students—learn, grow, change, aspire, lead.
- Many of us are looking for the panacea, the silver bullet. There aren't any.
- We are often looking outside the academy to companies to sell us what they call "solutions" usually involving expensive technology.
- We need to focus on what matters most—what you think on your campus, your unit—is most likely to achieve your institutional mission:
 - Learning
 - Relationships
 - Alignment
 - Expectations
 - Leadership
 - Assessment

What Do You Give Your Students to Read—to Get Them to Discover What Matters Most?

5-7-17

Recently I was asked by one of my publishers to complete an author survey. And one of the questions was truly impossible for me to answer as requested. It read something to the effect “what was the book that has influenced you most significantly? What I found impossible was to choose one! I found the exercise interesting and worthwhile not only because of the sheer number of books that I would so classify as having been of “most significant influence”, but what those books were and especially what time of life was I exposed to these written ideas/experiences.

So they began coming to me almost as a crescendo.

There were two books in my first-year of college, when I was doing terribly on the academic front and was lonely, homesick lovesick. And they were mandated by one of my first-term professors to read and to be the subjects of an oral examination if I wanted to raise my final grade in Speech 101 from an F to a D. Most valuable D I ever received. He had me read David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), a book really for academics but one that sold well beyond that for laypeople. Riesman, a Harvard professor, lawyer and sociologist, one of the greatest of the 20th century, and also a scholar of the American college and university presidency. *The Lonely Crowd* was an argument that America produces two kinds of people: the Inner Directed Man and the Outer Directed Man (the direction being in reference to who and what are our influencers, inner vs outer oriented stimuli. My professor wanted me to examine that question for myself. What kind of person was I—was I becoming—or could become? Riesman analyzed a number of our culture's favorite stories for children and he forced me to think about how I had been influenced by the stories I had read as a child. And nineteen years after being made to read his book, Riesman wrote me an unsolicited letter in 1980 raising some questions with me based on an article of mine he had read in the *Journal of Higher Education*, about one of my—and as it turn out—his favorite subjects. Riesman was also the founder of Harvard's first-year seminar, in 1959, two years before I became a first-year student.

The other book was *Escape from Freedom*, by Erich Fromm, a German psychoanalyst, who escaped from the Third Reich and wrote a compelling analysis of why the German people, at the time the most literate of any of the European democracies, had voluntarily given up their freedoms in 1933. The book was really about what for some of us is the burden of freedom, the challenge of making decisions on our own. And there I was, as the professor knew full well, a young man who had abused his freedom by overcutting this class, six times in fact. Why do some college students, for example, voluntarily decide to give up a number of their freedoms to join certain groups that make many of their decisions for them (such as with whom to associate), groups especially like fraternities and sororities? This book invited me to consider the uses, the choices, albeit the abuses, I was making with my freedom. And I concluded that I needed to reconsider some of those choices. And it was several years later, also while in college, that I read Fromm's perennial best seller, *The Art of Loving*, which argues that before anyone can love anyone else, they have to be capable of self-love, meaning self-respect.

And then there was my reading of Plato's *Republic* in the fall of my junior year, in a political philosophy class. We examined some of the most important questions that any society has to constantly be in the process of deciding: who should rule? Plato was having Socrates argue that philosophers should be kings. And the related question, that my whole adult life has been in pursuit of: what is justice? By then I was getting the idea that what was really happening to me in college is that I was learning that the questions can often be more important than the answers. To have a meaningful life you have to be asking and pursuing the right questions. In this same course, on the day of class that the professor was going to

lead us through Plato's argument about "who should rule" our class was interrupted by the shocking news of the assassination of President Kennedy on November 20th, 1963.

And then also that fall, in a course on Transcendental American writers, I was taking a very deep dive in the complete works of essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I have never been the same since reading *Self Reliance*. Thank goodness. I was really ready to receive Emerson's call to intellectual individualism. And I was so fortunate I had a professor who knew just how to do that so skillfully. I didn't go to college expecting that I would come to love Emersonian prose but that's exactly what happened. The course influenced me to do a research project to ascertain what might have been the influence on Emerson of New England Unitarianism. And I thought that to understand this question and possibility even more thoroughly I should try to grapple with it experientially. I did so by joining a small handful of other congregants who attended the weekly service of the Marietta, Ohio Unitarian Church. I learned that that faith was all about what my college experience had become: a search for the truth, my truths, which were being discovered by me through reading and interaction with the interpreters of those readings, my professors. What powers they had over me. And I allowed them to help me discover my own powers for discovery, and then to influence others.

In my junior year, I took an elective biology course in a course titled "Conservation." We were required to read Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*, the work that is generally credited with launching the now more than fifty year old "environmental" movement. Before this book, I had not given one thought to what I and my fellow men and women were doing to our environment. This work really changed me.

In my senior year, I read Joseph Heller's first novel, *Catch 22*. Sadly, Heller was a one author great thinker. Try as hard as he did in a succession of following books, all of which I faithfully read, none of them did for me, let alone any of the critics, like what *Catch 22* did. The first time I read *Catch 22*, I really didn't get it, the "it" being the power of his satire of the insanity of bureaucratic life and thinking, as personified by Heller in the US Army of World War II. But two years later when I was on active duty in the US Air Force, and read *Catch 22* again, then it hit me. He had finally showed me how bureaucracies work, often making some of their members literally crazy, by the non-rationality of some of their arbitrary rules and processes.

So as I was recalling what I had read of greatest influence, and when I did that reading and thinking, that all these greatest influencers had come during undergraduate school. How could this be? This doesn't mean I stopped reading upon graduating from college! Absolutely not. But I can't think of anything that I have read since college that had the same level of formative influence on my most important understandings—of myself, my work, my culture, my role in society, human group and individual behavior—you name it. I can only conclude then that I was in a unique period of openness to new ideas, to being influenced, to self-discovery. But that openness had to be facilitated, nourished, encouraged, reinforced. And my professors and a few fellow students were the ones who did so. I was developmentally ready, hungry even. And the college experience was there for me, ready for me, able to develop me in only ways that it could. I am so thankful.

I have often asked my workshop audiences what they remember reading that had some influence during their first-year of college. Almost to a person, each group member can recall something specific. Maybe this is just because I work in the world of the academic bubble. These people liked being in college and so they have stayed in it for their adult lives. They truly were influenced. I know that once I experienced this influence I never wanted to leave it.

I have had much less success asking my students, particularly first-year students, what it is they read before college that has influenced them. They struggle with this, in part because no one has asked them this before.

So I ask you: what were the great written works that influenced you? And what do you have your students read with the hope that this work and your guidance of them to and through it will be of significant influence? I know, it took me a long time here to get to my question. And the question for you should be much more important than the answers I have offered, just as has been the lasting impact of some of the questions I learned to ask in college, especially: what is justice? My whole adult professional life has been devoted to that question.

What We Tell our Students May Matter More Than We or They Realize at the Time...

5-13-17

When I was a very homesick, unsure, unfocused first-year student, failing most of my courses, one day my political science professor, R.S. Hill, asked me after class "Mr. Gardner, would you like to be a good student?" He really caught me by surprise, that he would ask me anything at all and what specifically he asked me. I stopped and thought about his question and answered that I would, silently acknowledging to myself I had no idea what I would have to do to become a "good student." His answer astounds me to this day, some 56 years later. He said: "Well, for starters you would start reading a good newspaper."

John: "And how would I go about doing that; what is a good newspaper?"

Professor Hill: "Well, of course, The New York Times. There is no other like it. You should read The Times because then you won't need anyone, including me, to tell you what some politician or judge said or wrote. You will be able to read the full text of what was said or written and then you can decide for yourself what the meaning and the importance of the message."

John: "Ok, sir, well how would I go about doing this?" (I truly didn't know because I had grown up in a staunch Republican household where my father thought—and said—that The Times was a "communist newspaper" and he wouldn't allow it in the house." So, I knew that to read such a paper would be an act of sedition defying my father who was paying to send me to this college where this professor was giving me such advice.

Professor Hill: "Come with me, Mr. Gardner, and we will walk right now two blocks to "People's News" where if you don't want to read the daily copy in the College library you can have your own personal copy. The Times comes in every morning on the 11.22 Greyhound from Pittsburgh (the bus terminal being one block from the news store) and it will be available to you every day by noon. The Greyhound is never late (I had never thought of the Greyhound bus as an agent of civilization and an intellectual lifeline to the rural American heartland in southern Appalachia in Ohio and no one today would extend such a compliment to any airline).

And that's how I started reading the daily Times, which I still do quite faithfully, in the paper edition, even though I also have a subscription for the on-line edition which I read when I am traveling.

And all because a professor introduced me to an adult habit. He explained also to me that "Mr. Gardner, you should know that in addition to you, the other most influential people in the world will be reading that same paper on the same day and will know then what you will know." And fifty-six years later I still want to know what the most influential people in the world are reading each morning. And I know one who lives during the week at 1600 Pennsylvania who doesn't like what he reads in The Times.

A few weeks later in the term, I had an appointment with my academic advisor, a professor of speech, one Dr. Thomas Fernandez. He reviewed my mid-term grades and made this pronouncement: "Mr. Gardner, you are the stupidest kid I have ever advised!" I left his office and removed the dagger he had inserted in my self-concept. I didn't quite know if what he said could be true. I knew I wasn't doing well, failing most everything. But was I really the "stupidest kid" the guy had ever advised? But I made a decision anyway: to get another advisor. I was pleased it was easy to actually switch advisors, something many of our students probably ought to consider doing. And my successor advisor became one of the keys to my eventual success in college, Professor Kermit Gatten. He really embraced me and I began to flourish. He and his wife had me in their

home for visits and meals numerous times. And his advice, which I took, served me incredibly well for the balance of my college career. I later was told that my first advisor ultimately became a college president in Texas. Wonder how many other people he labeled as “stupid?”

Two years later, in another political science course, designated as “American Political Parties”, the professor was lecturing on the legal actions leading up to the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs Board of Education, declaring legally segregated schools both unequal and unconstitutional. One of the preceding cases he discovered was one banning the infamous southern “white primaries,” which the Court struck down in 1944 in Smith vs. Alright. The only reason I remember this now is because of what followed. I asked the professor, Eugene Murdock, what the court’s rationale for its ruling was. He replied to me: “Mr. Gardner, I do not know. How would you like to do some research and determine the answer to your own question yourself, and then report to the class what you found?” It was not a rhetorical question. I knew he meant it. I did not think he was trying to pressure me, let alone punish me for asking him a question to which he did not know the answer. I thought he was just being honest. I later realized that he was also being a wonderful role model for the professor I was going to become, but didn’t know that at the time—specifically, when a student were to ask me a question to which I did not know the answer, I would so indicate. Well, I accepted his invitation; did the research; determined the Court’s rationale; and made an oral presentation to my class on what I had learned. In my four years of undergraduate school, other than Speech 101 when I did have obligatory public speaking in class, this was the only presentation I was ever allowed to make in any course in any class. That’s right, one in four years. No wonder it really stood out in my mind and still does. I was nervous about doing this before my peers and my professor. But it went well. Professor Murdoch praised me publicly. And I soon realized that this one gesture on his part had truly given me a sense of empowerment and presence I had never experienced before.

On another occasion during college, I was studying in the Library and a professor I respected greatly walked by, stopped, and approached my study carrel and said: “Mr. Gardner, I just read your paper and it was truly excellent.” To have unsolicited praise like that from someone whom I knew was REALLY gifted intellectually (unlike me, a neophyte just beginning to learn how to be a college student) that pushed me on to a cloud nine and boosted my confidence and self-esteem.

Two weeks before I was to graduate, someone broke into my rental house and stole only my lecture notebooks, for all my courses. What a hostile act. I was in a small college and many of us students knew each other all too well. And I was known as a compulsive note taker for whom his lecture notes were a critical ingredient to his academic success. I was very active in campus politics and, obviously, had made an enemy. I went to one of my professors and asked for an incomplete for the term that would give me time to reconstruct my notes. He agreed and told me he would allow me to take a make-up, take home unproctored final exam—with the words: “Mr. Gardner, I trust you. I know you are a person of honor.” I have been trying to live up to that ever since. One by one my professors were writing the script of my adult life. I didn’t know it then. But I know it now.

How are you writing the script for your students? What are the succinct verbal, or written, messages are you sending them that they will remember for the rest of their lives, and that will shape the development of their character and self-concept profoundly?

Several months ago, my early forties son related to me his recent professional encounter with a woman in South Carolina with whom he talked about her experiences at the University of South Carolina. He asked her if she had taken University 101 as a first-year student. She said she did. Then he asked her who her professor was. She said she didn’t remember but she remembered things he said and taught her. As she shared an illustration of the professor’s advice to her my son realized that she had to be talking about his father, me. Apparently, the professor admonished the students at the end of the term in December not to make any major life decisions (such as to drop out of college or transfer, or get married or get divorced) as the end of first term

of college, especially at holiday time was a very sentimental, often emotional period and not a good context for making rational decisions. She told him that she practices that advice to this very day, over 30 years later.

We have no idea what we say to our students that may really sink in at present time or later. We just have to believe that the messages we send them do matter and hence chose our words intentionally and affirmatively.

What a Difference the First Year of College Can Make

5-13-17

I have devoted most of my exactly fifty-year career to trying to make the first year of American higher education a more positive experience for our students—in terms of their learning, personal growth, maturation, satisfaction, retention, self-esteem, and more. But I never stop asking what more/else can we do? And I keep looking for illustrations of what we do accomplish.

The traditional end of the conventional academic year for full-time college students is a good time to be reflecting on a question like this. SoSo, what did we accomplish for our first-year students this particular year? And what a year it was! The year of Donald Trump's election, deep national divide, and great disaffection, despair and anger on the part of students who rightfully believe that others do not think their "lives matter."

Of course, we are all profoundly shaped by our own life experiences, from the past of long ago and the very immediate present. Hopefully, experiences in both and all domains give us college educators more empathy to understand our students, and in this case, what difference does the first year make.

Just the past April, I had to give a talk in Dallas and that happens to be the city where my wife, Betsy Barefoot, has a grandchild who chose to go there for her undergraduate education. Her choice was driven by many variables including the wishes of her parents, but mainly it was for the opportunity to play college varsity volleyball. She had been an all-around outstanding high school student with stellar academic, athletic, leadership and interpersonal skills. If ever there was a kid who was prepared for college this was one.

SoSo, I secured her willingness to have me come out to campus and pay her a brief visit. She gave me a great gift, namely about three hours of her time. This included a tour of the campus including her residence hall room and a lunch with her significant other, a young man whom she had praised in advance to me because as she put it: "He is a real gentleman; he listens to me and we talk a lot." She was having a very successful academic year. Dean's List for first semester and looking like she would have an encore performance for second term. Making an extremely good social adjustment. Lots of friends. Nodded, smiled, and spoke to many students as she walked me around the campus. Obviously was very at home at the place. Compatible with all three of her room mates. Enjoying the volleyball even though she had been injured and was going to have to have knee surgery. This is an incredibly cheerful, positive, open, enthusiastic young woman. She remains focused on pursuing a long held academic and career goal: becoming an elementary school teacher. She is very focused, highly motivated. She maintains regular and excellent communication with her parents, who are the foundation for a very functional family with four children.

SoSo, I asked her if she thought college had changed her any. She paused for a long time and finally shared that she thought it had—"somewhat"...somewhat "...maybe a little....." But there was a tentativeness about her response. I wondered if it was because she hadn't really been asking herself about that. Or if it was because she just had such a fundamentally positive disposition about everything and almost everyone. I concluded that she really didn't know. She hadn't had enough time or detachment to make a judgement about that. She allowed as if she thought it had made her "somewhat" or "slightly" more "independent." I have known this student since she was born, for 18 years, and if there were any changes as a result of the first year, they were very subtle and not discernible to my well1- trained eye.

And it was inevitable that I would compare her to my own first year, what I had been like at the start, and where I found myself at the end of that year.

I think she arrived at college well adjusted. I did not.

She made good friends immediately. I did not.

She was immediately successful academically. I was not

She was on a varsity athletic team. I was on a junior varsity team (lightweight crew).

She had received an academic scholarship. I certainly did not.

She was the first child of her siblings to go to college. So was I.

She didn't confess any initial homesickness to me. I was terribly homesick.

She had a declared major and a career orientation that is very strong, very certain. I had no major. Never did. Thank you Marietta College for not making me choose a major.

She terminated a "from back home" romantic relationship in the first year and entered a new one. I did neither. But should have.

She was very disciplined as a student. I was not.

She ended up on the Dean's List after first semester. I ended up on academic probation.

She had fellow room mates who were also making a successful adjustment to college. I did not. My first room-mate was so homesick that he left college (and me) after the first six weeks! I didn't know you could leave college. It wasn't an option my father had given me! He was replaced by a second room-mate. He was a heavy drinker, often as he lay nearly prone in his bunk, from which he acquired the nickname "Bunky." He also dropped out, flunked out, after the first year of college.

I got no sense that she had changed her views about organized religion. I changed mine, drastically, from a budding agnostic to a convinced agnostic. She had entered with a strong Christian faith, I had not. My introduction to sociology course destroyed what conventional religious notions I had left.

I finished the first year of college having rejected my parents' political persuasion, a deep loyalty to the Republican party. I had never heard a good word about the Democrats until such came out of the mouths of some of my professors. My wife's grandchild has two liberal Democrats for parents and I certainly caught no wind that their first-year student had changed her political persuasion.

I was not making good choices about my romantic life. She appears to be!

I had become very engaged with a number of professors. I was thriving in my relationship with my academic advisor. I visited many of my professors in their offices and some of them in their homes too. I have no sense that she has this kind of relationship with her faculty even though both of us had started at small, private colleges.

She is already planning a study abroad in the second semester of her sophomore year. I never developed any plan for study abroad. She is already way ahead of me in that regard.

She will end the first year with a much higher GPA than I did. All I can say in summary comparison on this

point is that at least I managed to get off academic probation by the end of the first year.

She has a summer job lined up that is compatible with her career aspiration of being an elementary school teacher: that of a camp counselor. She has had this job lined up for a year. I had no job lined up when I went home. My father, not liking what he was seeing college do to me, thought I needed "a job where you will be in the real world and see how the other half lives!?" He arranged a manual labor job for me in a factory for a company in which he was a senior executive. SoSo, I became a unionized steelworker making beer cans in the pits of urban New Jersey.

In sum, the jury is in on me. It is still way out on this grandchild. She shows far more promise at this point than I did. But I am betting that college changed me far more than it will change her. I needed that. Maybe she doesn't. We are very different people. I think I finished the first year more intellectually engaged, more intellectually transformed than she is. She is on her way far more to attaining her career objectives than I was at the same point. Hey, I didn't have any career objectives. She is ending her first year happier than I, much more satisfied.

The first year of college was good for both of us. But she sure does show much more promise at the end of the first year than I did.

Let's bring this back to you my reader: what are you trying to facilitate for your first-year students?

What do you most want for them?

What are you providing to make that happen?

What kind of priority are first-year students at your institution?

Are you trying to "transform" them in anything approaching the manner I think my college transformed me?

What kind of experiences did you have in your first year of college that serve as your experiential base of empathy for your own first-year students?

My first year of college was a case study for how a college could have done a whole lot more for me and how I could have done a whole lot better. This has profoundly influenced my work, my life, and thus many, many other lives as well. What can you say about your impact on first-year college students?

And by the way, I didn't have a university 101, college success, first-year seminar type course. But I sure could have benefited from one. My alma mater has one now, for sure! And I am part of the reason for that.

Title		Topic(s)
First Blog	10/21/09	Russ Edgerton
What Question(s) Would You Ask?	10/23/09	FYE
Homecoming: A vestigial organ, or an idea whose time has come?	10/27/09	college homecoming
Education for what?	10/29/09	why higher ed?
The New Normal for "Night School"	11/3/09	night school
Let's take the "H" out of Housing: It's all in a name!	11/4/09	ACUHO
An Alternative to "Housing" for the Higher Ed Lexicon	11/6/09	Academic Residential Environments
Students in Transition	11/9/09	students in transition
Veteran's Day Salute	11/11/09	Veterans' Day
Veterans Day Reflection Sept 12th posting	11/12/09	Veterans' Day
Veterans Day Reflection: All I Ever Needed to Know about Orienting New Students to College I Learned in the Military	11/16/09	FYE
Power to the Peers!	11/19/09	peer mentors
How Long Has it Been Since You Were in a High School?	11/18/09	high school
Can Your Thanksgivings Past Be Instructive for Your Students?	11/23/09	Thanksgiving
Thanksgiving blog #2 for Nov 24 2009	11/24/09	Thanksgiving
Ode to Thanksgivings Past: Part Two	11/20/09	JFK assassination
Thankful for the Access We Once Had	11/30/09	higher ed equal access
Q: And what did you do over Thanksgiving vacation? A: What you did is who you are.	12/1/09	"work"
The Blog as First-Year Student Diary: Writing is for Life	12/3/09	writing is for life
The Times They Are A'Changing: our Friendly Regional Accreditors	12/7/09	accreditors
I feel this coming: the four-year degree must go!	12/9/09	the four-year degree
My Philosophy of Student Success	12/11/09	philosophy of student success
Why We are In This Work	12/14/09	why we are in this work
'Tis the Season: For Engaging Our Students in Taking Stock	12/16/09	Year end reflection
How is "change" affecting our students? Oh, in just a few ways!	12/21/09	college students and change
2010 blogs		
An Unplanned Opportunity for Community	1/4/10	community
Happy Valley is Not the Norm	1/6/10	student life
Happy Anniversary to My Adult Self	1/11/10	my first college teaching,

The Great Recession's Toll on Our Students	1/13/10	The Great Recession
Check List for Starting a New Term	1/15/10	starting a new term
MLK Day: What Does This Evoke For You?	1/19/10	MLK
Just Say Anything	1/20/10	Haiti earthquake crisis
Relevance: The Week That Was	1/25/10	politics/justice/government
The New Normal: The Transfer Experience	1/27/10	transfer
Blog: The Art of Complimenting	1/29/10	compliments
The Merits of Being Stranded	2/1/10	fye
Receiving is as Important as Giving: As in Compliments!	2/4/10	compliments
Keeping A Stiff Upper Lip: How Truthful to Be with our Students?	2/8/10	learned optimism
What's Your Big Idea?	2/10/10	big ideas/fye
Wintering into Wisdom	2/11/10	wisdom
What Do Students Really Need?	2/22/10	residence halls
Surely They Must Know	3/3/10	Informing/Inspiring students
Campus as a microcosm: We must do better	3/8/10	campus as microcosm of society
How Students are Meeting Hard Times	3/10/10	"Collegiate Dreams and Expectations Meet Hard Times"
What my Father Wanted Me to Do in College	3/15/10	non-profit organizations
Encourage Your Students to Make Their Wishes Known	3/17/10	health care
Child of the 60's	3/22/10	social, and educational, justice
How Do We Help Students Understand the Significance of What Just Happened?	3/24/10	engaging students to reflect on events
So Many Teachable Moments	3/26/10	engaging students to reflect on events
Does the sophomore year matter?	3/31/10	sophomore year
If You Could Give Your Students One Book	4/2/10	recommending books
Beyond Passover and Easter: It Can't Be Long Now	4/5/10	summer school
What Would You Like Me to Blog About?	4/7/10	freewriting
Do You Know How Lucky You Are?	4/9/10	things we take for granted
A Winning Combination	4/15/10	assessment and using results
Oh no, "the Sophomore Year Experience"	4/20/10	sophomore year
What Will Our Students Remember	4/26/10	"facilitators" of student learning.
What Are You Learning? How Are You Reacting To It? And What Are You Going to Do with it?: Teaching for Reflection	4/29/10	reflection and learning
Forget the Official Commencement: Your "Farewell Address" Is the One That Will Matter	5/3/10	farewell address

Last Chance: Urge your Students to Stay Connected this Summer	5/5/10	summer break
Some Good News on the Retention Front	5/17/10	Foundations of Excellence
Learn More about Improving the Transfer Experience for STEM Students	5/19/10	transfer and STEM
The "Correction": What Could That Mean In Our Higher Education Context?	5/21/10	concept of "correction"
An Outcome of College: What We Do on Vacation	6/1/10	vacations
What Has Been the Impact of the Great Recession on the First-Year Improvement Initiative	6/7/10	foundations of Excellence
An Annual Glimpse Beyond My Cultural Blinders	6/9/10	International FYE
An Obvious Opportunity and Suggestion	6/14/10	teachable moments
Reminding Myself About the Importance of Having a Personal Philosophy of Education	6/17/10	personal philosophy
Never Enough Opportunities to Teach Leadership	6/21/10	leadership
I Am What I Studied	6/23/10	general education
The New American Comprehensive College	6/25/10	new American comprehensive college
Could We Develop a Curriculum to Teach This?	6/28/10	"family, respect, integrity, and hard work."
Baptism as Ritual: What's the Analog in Higher Education?	7/2/10	rituals
How about an Independence Day for new students?	7/6/10	independence day for students
Just How Far Would You Go to Help Students	7/8/10	inflating grades
What Do You Want to Be Remembered For?	7/19/10	personal legacy
How Could We Be Preparing College Students Who Want to Work in the Academy but not for the Academy?	7/22/10	careers in the academy
What is it That We Do For Students That Matters?	7/27/10	caring about your students
A New Beginning	7/28/10	launch meetings
The New Normal	8/9/10	recession
Empathetic Recall	8/18/10	beginning college experience
Succession Plan	8/20/10	successors
Life Begins at 80	8/24/10	age
A First: A Student Success Plan for First Year to Graduate School	8/31/10	Foundations of Excellence
Important New Collaborator on My/Our Work	9/3/10	Drew

Optimism: How are we going to teach it this year?	9/9/10	projecting optimism
College Made Me Vacation Like I Do	9/7/10	disconnect, vacation
Freedom: A Subject for More than Just a Common Read	9/24/10	Freedom by Jonathan Franzen
Small Colleges Can Be Inspiring	9/23/10	NCICU
Where are the Men? Not Dealing with the Male Problem!	9/30/10	men and college
Memories are Made of This	9/30/10	personal writing
I Have Seen the Future and the Future is Us	10/8/10	South Texas College visit
Reflecting on the Tragedy at Rutgers: A Tragedy for All	10/10/10	suicide, homophobia
The Most Inspiring Meeting I Attend All Year	10/13/10	Foundations of Excellence
The Movement is Spreading and Deepening	10/18/10	FYE
What Would it Take?	10/20/10	protesting
15 Triggers for Discussion	10/21/10	student success
It's All About Social Justice	10/25/10	social justice, student success
I Have Seen the Future and it is Here # 2	11/1/10	transfer
For Campuses Who Can't Go Greek, How Can They Do Greek?	11/3/10	fraternity/sorority
Character Building Experiences: Bring Back the Paper Person	11/10/10	work experiences
Here's to the Enduring Influence of the Faculty!	11/8/10	faculty
Texting as Surrogate Touch	11/15/10	paying attention to students
A Truly Invisible New Student	11/17/10	foster care students
What Do Our Students Do for Privacy?	11/19/10	need for privacy
Our Words Do Matter	11/22/10	politicized words
2011 blogs		
Tucson's Day of Infamy	1/12/11	Pima CC tragedy
Announcing Additional Bloggers	1/19/11	new contributors
Thirtieth Anniversary Coming Up Soon: What's Your Big Idea?	1/19/11	Conference on The First-Year Experience
Remember: Our Impact Transcends our Own Country	1/18/11	re: visit to South Africa
Let's Hear It for South Africa	1/26/11	re: visit to South Africa
Constantly Reassessing Individual Purpose	1/27/11	sense of purpose
What If?	2/2/11	social media/student activism
Thirty Years and Going Strong	2/8/11	Conference on The First-Year Experience
Reporting From Down Under	2/11/11	Australia observations
Let's Run the Campus Like the New Zealanders Run Their Customs	2/14/11	New Zealand observations

Looking at the Campus Through the Lens of the Haves vs. the Have Nots	2/16/11	student equity
Silence	2/18/11	silence breaks
"Well, I have never thought about that before..."	2/22/11	personal safety/freedom
Some Departing Thoughts upon Leaving Paradise	2/20/11	New Zealand observations
My Luckiest Day	2/23/11	existentialism, NZ earthquake
Final Notes on Comparing Three Countries	2/28/11	comparing US to other countries
Readjusting to My Country: It Has Been An Adjustment	3/14/11	comparing US to other countries
What Shall We Tell Them?	3/16/11	civil servants
Just Look Around	3/20/11	talking with students
Learning to Be A Little Less American: Collaboration vs Competition	3/26/11	collaboration
Salute to Those Who Provide Tutoring	3/27/11	tutors/tutoring
Take a Student to Lunch (breakfast/supper) and See Who Learns the Most	4/4/11	talking with students
What's On Your Mind?	4/6/11	talking with students
An Alternative to Cries from the Tea Party: Let's hear it for a tax increase	4/11/11	taxation
Own Your Power	4/13/11	academic freedom/personal choice
How College Affected This Student: Why I Make My Students Make The New York Times A Part of Their Daily Lives	4/18/11	the NYT
Dispensing Wisdom	4/20/11	wisdom, University 101
The Tail Wagging the Dog	4/25/11	small/rural institutions
At Last, We are Finally Asked to Sacrifice	4/27/11	personal sacrifice/common good
A Perspective I am Going To Keep Reminding Myself Of	5/2/11	Dr. Elsie Froment, USC 60/70s
What Did I Accomplish Today?	5/4/11	vocations
Joining the Students for their "Journey"	5/9/11	student's journey
"Til Death Do Us Part"	5/13/11	reunion college friends
Commencements: What Would You Tell Graduating Students?	5/18/11	commencement
Musing Upon the Commencement of Annual Vacation	5/31/11	being data oriented
How About Something Positive?	6/13/11	positive comments
Acting Like A Full Professor with Tenure in Contexts Where You Are Not a Full Professor with Tenure	6/12/11	academic freedom/personal choice

This Summer: What Are We Orienting them For?	6/15/11	orientation
The International FYE Movement Continues	6/20/11	IFYE
In Some Important Ways I Have Not Left Home	6/22/11	IFYE
We Have Failed This Generation	6/27/11	IFYE
Twelve Years Later: What Do I Miss?	6/29/11	retirement reflection
College as Lab for Real Life	7/7/11	civil behavior
What I Got for Firing All the Teachers	7/11/11	tax cuts
How About A Curriculum for An Antidote to Societal Pursuit of Greed and Selfishness?	7/12/11	taxation
How to Teach Big Picture Thinkers	7/18/11	mentoring
Dear Readers	7/20/11	asking for blog topic suggestions
Retention is a Real Slog	7/27/11	student retention
Why “dorm” and “housing” are terms that have long outlived their usefulness!	8/1/11	residence life
If Only the Campus/Country were a Symphony Orchestra	8/7/11	order/communication/ritual
We Produced These Leaders: Where Did We Fail?	8/15/11	leadership
My “Dream Sheet” for Improving On-Campus Residential Living	8/22/11	residence life
Take Home to Campus Lesson from Debt Ceiling Debacle	8/17/11	campus leadership
My Favorite Day of the Year	8/17/11	opening day on campus
An Education Major for Anyone?	8/23/11	education major
The Vacation Challenge to Technology Addiction	8/28/11	technology
Surely We Can Do Better	9/1/11	campus/student behavior
What Would YOU Do if Only You Had The Time and the Money?	9/6/11	Russ Edgerton
Reunion Anyone?	9/14/11	50th High school reunion
Here's A Goal for You: Make it 'til your 50th	9/19/11	50th High school reunion
Hedonism—or What's the Alternative?	9/12/11	volunteerism and hedonism
My 9/11 Was Not My Students'	9/11/11	9/11 reflection
What Do We All Believe In?	9/28/11	student success
What Would You Do If You Wanted to Understand Today's Students?	10/5/11	interactions with college students
How Do You Talk to Students About Gender Differences?	10/19/11	discussions about gender
Let's Get Them to Tell Their Stories for Posterity	10/3/11	students' experiences
On the Way to War with Teddy Bear and	10/7/11	women off to war, personal

Memories of Mother		observation
Inspired by Andy Rooney: What Do You See Your Role in Life to Be?	10/12/11	Andy Rooney farewell
Moneyball? What Role Loyalty (versus money)?	10/17/11	team loyalty
What's A One Liner Your Students Might Remember and Be Influenced By?	10/26/11	words of wisdom
Inequality Sinking In	11/2/11	inequality and social mobility
Fall: That Special Season for Beginnings and Endings	11/7/11	mileposts
Inspiration from Private Enterprise	11/9/11	college student as valued "customer"
Veteran's Day 2011	11/14/11	military service
Reflections from Italy	11/16/11	diversity
Thanksgiving 2011	11/23/11	thankfulness
Remembering the Power of Mentoring	11/30/11	mentoring
"What, Me Marry?"	11/21/11	men vs women in college
Rethinking the Value of Coaching and Athletics	12/7/11	mentors/Harry E "Sid" Varney
Critical Junctures: A Way of Thinking about Where We Need to Intervene to Support Students	12/7/11	social and academic critical junctures
What Did I Learn and What Am I Going to Do With What I Learned?	12/12/11	pedagogy-facilitation
Take a Look at Student Behavior: What Does it Tell You?	12/19/11	mentors/FYE
Looking for Signs of Hopefulness	12/21/11	hopefulness
2012 blogs		
Higher Education Innovators (Like Me) Are Made Not Born	1/4/12	innovation taught
A Guiding Framework	1/5/12	guiding questions
"Feeling Overwhelmed" as Subtext for "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind"	1/9/12	leadership/employee morale
Thinking of Martin Luther King 2012	1/12/12	MLK
A Quaker Perspective About Says It All	1/19/12	speak truth into power
What Would You Like Me to Blog About?	1/25/12	blog ideas request
Social Justice Redux	2/6/12	social justice
A Day with Student Affairs Leaders	2/13/12	student affairs
Happy Birthday FYE	2/14/12	FYE
Retrospective: Planning Your College Career As If You Knew the Competencies You Needed	2/22/12	competencies/college success
Reporting Live from the 31st Annual First-Year Experience Conference	2/22/12	FYE
What is the Role of the President/Chancellor in	2/27/12	president/chancellor

Improving the First Year?		
Let's Get Back to Basics: What is the Purpose of our Work?	2/29/12	student success
So Where Are The Men?	3/7/12	men and college
Let's Hear It for Alma Mater	3/12/12	Marietta college
This Could Be Us—Or Is It?	3/19/12	Greg Smith - Goldman Sachs
One More Pressure Point on Retention	3/21/12	student retention
Prejudice: The New But Not So New Underclass	3/21/12	transfer
A Step to Mitigate the August Train Wreck	3/30/12	Santa Monica College
We Weren't Designed for These People: Discrimination against Transfer Students –Part One	4/9/12	transfer
Transfer Discrimination: Part 3	4/13/12	transfer
Transfer Discrimination: Part 2	4/11/12	transfer
The End of the Term Calls for Some Silence	4/23/12	college experience
Reaching Out to High Schools and Our Future Students	4/24/12	high school
End of Term	5/12/12	summer break
Academic Observations from Venice	5/2/12	US vs. Italian higher ed
Here a College, There a College, Everywhere a College	5/9/12	higher ed US
Remove One Given from Your Campus: What Difference Would It Make?	5/7/12	college experience
American Higher Education's Race to the Bottom	5/21/12	US higher ed rankings
College Success: Misnomer?	5/11/12	student success
Reflections in the Little League Baseball Park	6/4/12	recognizing achievements
80%of Success is Simply Showing Up—Or Is It?	6/12/12	student success
Joy Kills Sorrow	6/11/12	FYE
The Commencement Speech as Reflection Tool	6/18/12	commencement
The Grand Divide-What Can We Do To Come Over to the Other Side?	6/28/12	inclusivity
Why Don't We Make Gateway Course Student Performance A Higher Priority: Restated as Why Are We So Tolerant of Such High Failure Rates?	7/21/14	gateway courses
There Are Lessons from Penn State for All of Us: This Applies to You!	7/11/12	campus/student safety
Penn State Redux: What Students Learn When They See Us Not Doing the Right Thing	7/18/12	integrity

Give It To Me in One Simple Reply	7/23/12	conversations vs email
Let's Hear It for the Completion Agenda	7/25/12	completion agenda
What Have You Accomplished?	7/30/12	life/work satisfaction
As Others See Us	8/2/12	IFYE
What Do Our Leaders Really Believe In?	8/11/12	Core values
What Would Your College/University Have to Do...to Have This Effect?	8/15/12	alma mater Marietta College
Four Sure Fire Ways to Kill a Conversation about Innovation and Change	8/22/12	effective conversations
What Will They Amount To?	8/29/12	college experience
Reflections of a Departing Vacationer	8/31/12	vacations
"I Shall Not Tell A Lie"	9/2/12	integrity
Oh, If Only We Didn't Have to Change	9/11/12	higher ed change
Quiet Please: Student Thinking Space	9/12/12	teaching thinking
Mystery Shopping: What does it Cost?	9/16/12	mystery shop college campus
Transfer Student Experience Déjà Vu	9/26/12	transfer
Higher Educators Going Back to Class	10/1/12	first-year seminars
The American People Want a President Not a Professor	10/3/12	professors
The Perfect Experiential Exercise for Linking Inside and Outside the Classroom Learning	10/15/12	learning/critical thinking
Students in Transition: What's New? What's Old?	10/19/12	SIT
Moving from "Access" to "Success": Just What Exactly Does That Mean?	10/29/12	student success
Policies Make a Difference in Student Success	10/31/12	student success
Watch this Place: Governors State University	11/5/12	Governors State
Funding is our "Crack"	11/13/12	increased revenues and effect on student success
Exhibit A for How to Sustain an Innovation: Forty Years Old and Going Stronger Than Ever	11/16/12	University 101
Thanksgiving 2012	11/20/12	thankfulness
Partnerships: More of what is Needed on Campus and in Washington	12/5/12	collaboration
'Tis the Season	12/9/12	end of fall term
What's to Be Learned?	12/12/12	changes
Addressing Retention: Only With a Slog	12/17/12	Retention
Year End Reflections for 2012	12/19/12	year end reflection
2013 blogs		
Thinking about the Year Ahead	1/7/13	new year
Zero Dark Thirty: Reflections on Persistence	1/9/13	persistence
Risk Management for Students and Their	1/14/13	taking risks

Educators Too		
It Was a Very Different Time	1/14/13	for the common good
"Mobilize." What Might That Mean for Your Work—My Work?	1/23/13	mobilization
Still Remembering Dr. King	1/28/13	MLK
A Good Way to Get "Up": Go to a Talent Show	2/11/13	high school
What Does It Mean to Be an "Ideologue"?	2/11/13	idealist/ideologue
We Are Committed to Equity	2/25/13	equity
How Would I Find A Mentor?	3/4/13	mentoring
Everybody Gets It: The Completion Agenda	3/10/13	completion agenda
Teaching Used to Make Me Sick	3/18/13	teaching
Checking In With Students	3/20/13	talking with students
Academic Probation: Getting On is Much Easier Than Getting Off!	4/4/13	academic probation
Travels with John	4/8/13	visiting campuses
Who Are We Doing this For?	4/9/13	student success
Nobody Wants to Talk to Me Anymore!	4/14/13	talk vs email
Students Give Me Hope and Inspiration	4/26/13	students inspire
What Were My Observations This Time?	5/13/13	observing culture outside US
How Do We End the Term—for Ourselves? A Closure Checklist	5/17/13	end of term/commencement
Got A Plan for New Student Success?	5/22/13	Foundations of Excellence
Confessions of a Repentant Blogger	6/15/13	blogging
Leave the Place a Little Bit Better..	6/24/13	community service
Being Honest and Authentic with Students Could Cost Some Educators Their Lives	6/26/13	IFYE
Seeing the Forest for the Trees	7/5/13	Arctic College
Avoiding the Faculty is Not the Way to Go	7/18/13	engaging faculty
"Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me 35 Years Ago"	7/24/13	empathy/student success
How Would You Feel?	7/26/13	equity
Do We Want Them To Be Like Us?	8/14/13	retrospective/college students experience
This is the Best Time of Year	8/19/13	first year college
Seeing With Different Eyes This Year	8/26/13	observations Canada vs US
I Had Never Heard Anything Like This	8/28/13	MLK/civil rights/bigotry
What Can I Do? What Can YOU Do?	9/4/13	inclusivity
What Kind of Help Do You Need?	9/7/13	student success
Your Friends, They Come and They Go ...	9/10/13	friendships/mentors
The Need to Be Reminded of What You Already Know	9/23/13	student success
If Ever There Was A Teachable Moment!	9/29/13	asking questions

The Tipping Point in the Beginning College Experience: For Some It is Soon Too Late for a Second Chance	9/30/13	first college year
What's in a Handshake? A Start	10/3/13	student interaction
What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?	10/10/13	the college experience
Elephant's Graveyard	10/14/13	Retention
Let's Try Going Wire[LESS]	10/7/13	electronic devices
These are The Times That Try Men's (and Women's) Souls	10/23/13	Reflections SIT
Like Some of our Students: Looking for the Meaning of Faith	10/23/13	faith
How Do I Learn What I Need to Know?	10/28/13	student success
Where Were You Daddy...?	11/1/13	defining moments
Acknowledging One's Mentor While You Both Still Have Time	11/13/13	mentoring
When and Why Should We Urge our Students to Get Engaged with "Service"?	11/18/13	community service
Why Can't We Do the Cool Stuff?	11/20/13	gateway courses
"Find A Good Company and Stick With It": What Advice Do We Give Our Students These Days?	12/9/13	career advice
Focusing on the Metrics of Retention: Higher Education with No Soul	12/11/13	retention
2014 blogs		
Looking Ahead to 2014	1/6/14	looking ahead
One Person/One Policy Makes a Difference	1/15/14	MLK
Talk about Partnerships and One Person Making a Difference	1/21/14	partnerships
Seven Principles of Good Practice for Student Success Partnerships	2/4/14	student success
The College Pipeline is Visible Long Before..	2/19/14	inclusivity
33 But Who's Counting? I Am!	2/21/14	FYE
What's Not to Like?	2/24/14	comparing US to other countries
It's All in the Shirt	2/26/14	attire/image
The Intentional Tourist	3/6/14	serendipitous conversations
What is Your Goal?	3/14/14	goals/aspirations
Using Vacation for Reflection on the Mundane and some Eternal Verities	3/17/14	comparing US to other countries
It's That Time of Year	5/5/14	end of term/commencement
"Back At You"	6/9/14	summer
1How Would You Handle This Student Success Challenge?	6/12/14	student success

What Can Be Done Over the Summer to Improve Next Year's Retention Rate?	6/11/14	summer break
Inspirations in a Concert	6/27/14	student success/inspiration
Salute to a Special Colleague in Transition: Is She or Isn't She Retiring?	7/1/14	Betsy's retirement
Reducing Failure Rates in Gateway Courses: All Aspirational Goals for Improving Student Success Depend on This!	7/17/14	G2C, student success
Why Don't We Make Gateway Course Student Performance A Higher Priority: Restated as Why Are We So Tolerant of Such High Failure Rates?	7/16/14	student success
Fall Ahead 2014	9/2/14	fall term
In Memorium: John J. Duffy	9/4/14	John J. Duffy
What are Your Roadmaps?	9/8/14	maps, mental maps
A Preview of Coming Attractions	9/10/14	RPM, G2C, FoE
The Power of Just One Educator	9/15/14	first college year
Something to Aspire To	9/17/14	Tony Bennett, FYE
My October 1 Anniversary	10/1/14	15th anniversary
A New Profession?	10/6/14	student success
Silos: A Must for Farmers, a Negative for Campuses	10/14/14	campus silos
What's in a Ceremony?	10/16/14	Robert B. Miller College
Moving to Scale	10/22/14	HIPs
Fall: A Good Season for Benchmarking and Transforming	11/5/14	mid terms
Finding the Money	11/10/14	priorities/student success
Veterans' Day 2014: What Brings Us All Together?	11/12/14	Veterans' Day
Irrational Love...Or is It Rational?	11/19/14	alma mater Marietta College
It's All about Meaningful Work	11/19/14	career/work
Two Great Universities Reputations Badly Tarnished: Is There A Common Theme?	12/4/14	male dominated higher ed
Year End 2014: Looking Back Looking Ahead	12/15/14	year end reflection
ADDENDUM:"YearEnd 2014: Looking Back Looking Ahead	12/17/14	year end reflection
2015 blog		
The Unfinished Movement for Social Justice	1/20/15	MLK/civil rights/bigotry
It's High Time Wrote!	2/23/15	FYE conference/presidential race
Write Our Own Future	3/11/15	writing
Learning from the Mistakes of Our Rulers	3/16/15	ACA
New Frontier for the First-Year Seminar	4/2/15	first-year seminars

Ode to a Retiring Colleague	7/7/15	Stuart Hunter
Do It: Mystery Shop Your Own Institution	7/7/15	campus visits
Way Down South In Dixie	7/9/15	civil rights/bigotry
The Gardner Institute Turns Sweet 16	10/21/15	Gardner Institute founding
2017 blogs		
Fifty Years Anniversary Posting—But Who's Counting? I Am!	1/28/17	retrospective/college teaching
Why Chief Academic Officers Matter (and Now More Than Ever)	2/6/17	CAOs
Good Things Will Come from Campus Unrest: They Have Before	2/4/17	social protests
Returning the Gift: You Never Know What a Student Can Do Unless You...	2/6/17	investing in others
Coming...a World Boycott?	2/14/17	US
Tenure: Look to Those Who Have It	2/22/17	tenure
The Transfer Experience vs The First-Year Experience: How Do They Measure Up? Here's a Simple Toolkit to Answer This Question.	3/13/17	transfer
The Beginning College Experience: What Could An Engaged Board Be Doing About This	4/1/17	first college year
The Big Disconnects	4/12/17	undergraduate experience
What Do You Give Your Students to Read—to Get Them to Discover What Matters Most?	5/7/17	The Lonely Crowd
What We Tell our Students May Matter More Than We or They Realize at the Time....	5/9/17	professor's impact
What a Difference the First Year of College Can Make	5/13/17	first college year
First Blog Post Draft 10-21-09.docx	10/21/09	Russ Edgerton
What Question(s) Would You Ask?	10/23/09	FYE