Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Your Professors Work for You!

Stephanie Wilson · Thursday, March 7th, 2013

My son said to me, “Education is free, we pay for college.” He’s eighteen years old and has only completed a semester of college, but he seems to have learned something. It’s true that much of my son’s education has been “free,” including running with the bulls, running through the streets of Rome on New Year’s Eve and running with sailors on Tall Ships. Of course, these things weren’t free for me, but accompanied with a good book on the topic, he seems to have learned quite a bit. Now it’s time to pay for his college.

We pay for college so we can get a piece of paper that says we are educated. This sounds cynical and sarcastic but it’s true. But once in school we are at the mercy of our “professors.” Many of them are amazing, caring and smart. They know their stuff and they know how to put that stuff into our brains. You know who they are.

Then there are those who are just passing time. George Leef, in his commentary in the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy says that, “Sellers of goods and services are motivated to do their best when they can make more money if they do a great job of satisfying their customers. On the other hand, very few will put forth their best when there is no extrinsic reward for doing so.” Many say that this is why the Communist Party failed.

The “War Generation” would be pretty angry about this. My grandmother would be pretty angry about this. They worked hard for the good of their community, cut back for the sake of the war effort, and gave their sons to the beaches of Normandy. Anyone who didn’t was just plain lazy.

Back to Mr. Leef who claims that it is all about profit, and in this day and age (and culture), he is probably right. Enter the new age of education, or perhaps the renaissance of an old age of education. It seems that incentives do matter and he uses the example of 18th Century universities in Great Britain. Some professors were paid directly by the students, which was a very clear example of goods for services. You pay me, I teach you Astronomy. These professors banked on their reputation, and had to work harder than those who were paid through the university. They had to win over their students. They had to deliver the goods.

It turns out the professors who worked directly for the university became, as my grandmother would say, lazy. Why care? They got paid anyway. Does this sound familiar? Do you have a professor who is phoning it in: confusing instructions, late grades and cancels class at the last minute?

Add to this the fact that many universities allow other members of the staff to choose and approve their colleagues, so why not surround yourself with people who think like you? And “who wants some over-achiever on the faculty, making us all look bad,” right? Then there’s tenure, an entirely

overwhelming problem.

So, what if we hired free-lance professors? Can these free-lancers hand me a certificate that helps me to get my degree? Can I take classes from a group of selected, credentialed, learned folks, who then hand me a smaller piece of paper to make sure that I can get the larger one? The answer is YES! With the popularity and feasibility of online classes becoming both respected and measurable, it is possible to change the system. Or, professors could rent space from a university – or any classroom space available – and teach the old-fashioned way.

Of course they might have to advertise, or rely on word of mouth. But if a professor could gain a following, that would lower the cost of the class for everyone. In other words, if a professor could fit fifty students in a room, and teach each one – we could all pay $25 for a great class and a certificate at the end!

This might all come too late for me, but not for my son. Taught to “question authority” by his ’60s-era mom, he is the perfect candidate for this kind of program. He’s a libertarian of the new order. He has always understood, even in high school, that his teachers work for the taxpayer, not the other way around.

Go forth. Explore. Stop paying for a sub-par education and instead allow your education and your college degree to serve the same purpose: To Learn.

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