
Regional

Higher education needs high-profile celebrities

In the last couple of decades, we have seen the widespread ascendancy of the phenomenon of celebrity in society. Everybody, particularly the younger generations, seem to know all about them. But celebrities as a cultural manifestation are not necessarily something new. We saw that phenomenon being exploited by Hollywood through their “star system,” by sport teams hungry for increasing their revenues and by politicians or infamous individuals because of their deeds (or misdeeds).

Now that phenomenon has expanded into areas that we would not have imagined decades ago, and one of them is in the field of science. With the advent of social media, the relaxation of social views regarding stereotypes, and the insights of some media corporations for the profits they could make with them, in the last few decades we have seen the rise of the celebrity scientist.

Examples of current celebrity scientists are many. The cosmologist Stephen Hawking is well known not only because of his best seller “A Brief History of Time,” but also for the recent movie about his life, “The Theory of Everything.” Another is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. He is known not only because of his 1977 best seller “The Selfish Gene,” but also for his steadfast stance criticizing religion. And more recently we have seen the rise of Neil deGrasse Tyson, the director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City, who hosted the second version of the TV series “Cosmos.”

All these individuals are responsible for heightening interest in scientific matters by the general public. But celebrity scientists are not a new phe-

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

nomenon. People like Galileo Galilei, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein and Carl Sagan were also famous and became very well known by the general public who rewarded them with appreciation for what they did to bring science to the masses.

Although most of them had an academic position at some point in their careers, the topics they talked about rarely, if ever, had to do directly with higher education as a human activity. And that is too bad. Colleges and universities are going through bad times having to deal with a variety of issues that range from diminishing funding, increasingly underprepared students and bad press. Unfortunately there are no national figures that can speak on behalf of these institutions. There is no one famous who can set the record straight when it comes to the realities of academia, or bring to the general public issues that affect the future of society through the challenges we face in postsecondary education.

And we need celebrities in academia that can play that role today. How can we make this to happen?

In a recent book by Declan Fahy titled “The New Celebrity Scientists: Out of the Lab and into the Limelight,” the author discusses what he calls the bases of “celebrification,” which he describes

as the result of three processes: (1) an individual whose physical appearance is easily recognizable (e.g., Einstein, Sagan, Hawking); (2) becoming a cultural commodity (e.g., Einstein seen as a genius, Sagan because his numerous TV appearances, particularly on Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show,” as well as Darwin through the caricatures of him); and (3) becoming the face of science before the general public. In any case all of them wisely used the media to express their views. They knew what needed to be said and how to say it.

I am surprised that despite college issues such as student debt and college cost becoming part of the political discourse in the current political campaign, one rarely sees people associated with higher education being consulted by major media outlets as experts who can render an informed opinion about these and other topics. Even worse is that it’s the naysayers about higher education who catch the attention of the nation’s media, including the most prestigious newspapers.

Here the responsibility falls, in part, on the news media for not finding eloquent spokespeople on behalf of academia. But it is also the responsibility of academia itself, where so few people are really trained (or have the natural instinct) to give a succinct and clear message that all people can understand – rather than a lecture.

In an interview given to “The Chronicle of Higher Education” and published on April 3, 2008, Mark G. Yudof, who had been chancellor of the University of Texas system for six years and was president of the University of California between

2008 and 2013, referred to an issue that is worth commenting on.

He talked about how people within higher education should be doing a better job

at communicating with society at large. He recognized that part of our problem is that we assume that people understand and value what we do, when the reality is otherwise. He was quoted, for example, saying that we have lacked the insight to hammer the fact that higher education “strengthens the economy, creates jobs, brings in industry, and so forth.” We need to explain, he added, why people should care what happens at colleges and universities, even if they do not have a son or daughter, brother or sister, who is currently enrolled in those institutions.

If we were able to produce celebrity experts on academic issues, we could give higher education a face, force and an impact in public life.

It is time for colleges and universities to promote the kind of individuals with the appropriate communication talent and training who can champion higher education. The academic celebrities should be able to develop the power to influence citizen understanding of how academic life impacts society for the better.

The future of higher education may depend upon those champions.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>