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# Higher education being haunted by zombies

The Twilight Zone was one of my favorite TV series when I was growing up. Of the 156 episodes, originally broadcast between 1959 and 1964, the one titled "The Changing of the Guard" left a striking mark on me. It was about a teacher named Fowler, interpreted by Donald Pleasence, who, after being forced to retire, contemplates suicide because he does not feel he has made a difference in the world. Then he imagines going back to his classroom where the ghosts of a number of his former students show up and tell him of all of their achievements while thanking him for teaching them values such as courage, ethics, bravery, patriotism, loyalty and honesty.

Fowler returns home where he reflects on the experience and says, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." This is actually a quote from Horace Mann, an American educator and reformer who created the system of public schools in this country aimed at providing free education to all so children would become productive members of society.

The episode, written by the series creator Rod Serling, ends with Fowler saying that he has lived a very good, full and rich life.

This is a good lesson we all need to remember about being a teacher. There is no question that teaching, at all levels, is a noble cause. Nobody becomes a teacher to be rich or famous. People who get into the profession do so because they feel that they can change people's lives, that they can really make a difference in this world.

However, sometimes that calling can be tested.

### Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

Education as an enterprise is being assaulted on many different fronts and for many different reasons.

Public education has been receiving less and less support by some politicians who seem to be enamored with the idea of tax cuts under the mantra that fewer taxes on the rich will spur economic development. It does not matter that this "trickle-down" economics idea has been debunked again and again. With the same passion that the Republican-controlled Congress keeps passing on an almost weekly basis a useless repeal of Obamacare, fans of the trickle-down idea keep repeating their blind faith on this faulty concept.

Then we have the numerous falsehoods spread along much of the political spectrum that education is expensive, that faculty earn too much money, and that the whole system is inefficient. To that end those critics propose an overhaul of that system by using some magical "technological fix," which is nothing but a different version of correspondence courses regardless of how many times it has been demonstrated that such systems only work for a narrow sector of the population, usually the better-off and already educated. The bottom line is that the proponents of ideas like these believe that good teachers can be replaced by robotic systems (i.e., computer programs) that can deliver education at a low cost

under the guise of new technologies.

Then we have those who propose an overhaul of what should be taught by concentrating efforts in teaching only utilitarian, technical skills. Their idea is that graduates in higher education should only have a narrow spectrum of abilities, disregarding that to succeed in the modern world requires what have been termed "soft skills," including critical thinking, communication, problem solving and team-work capabilities.

Some politicians also have concentrated efforts (at the local, state, and national levels) to impose all kind of regulations on education. Their ultimate goal is an ideological control of an activity they find onerous and ultimately inconvenient to their political agenda, despite their protestations that government oversight should be kept away from our educational system. These ideas persist no matter how many times it has been shown that these excessive regulations are not only ineffective but also increase the cost of education. Further, there is also this notion that institutions of higher education should be run as a business, forgetting that this activity is not a manufacturing activity generating a commodity and that students are not "consumers." The very essence of education is offering personal attention to a population with different needs in a changing world. This is the antithesis of a business, for-profit model.

On top of that, teaching as a profession has become the target of unfounded criticism that blurs not only the actual commitment of its practitioners but also casts a shadow on the honesty and value of professors. Professors are labeled as lazy "liberals" who work

very little while abusing the concept of tenure or sabbatical in order to have a life free of commitments and obligations. Their out-of-the-classroom activities such as scholarship and community service are viewed as just a fulfillment of their own hobbies being subsidized by either the taxpayers and/or students and their families through tuition and fees. Although there are always bad apples like in any other profession, the lambasting of teaching as an occupation is the product of unscrupulous generalizations.

Unlike the ghosts who appear in The Twilight Zone episode thanking Professor Fowler for his teachings, what we have now are zombie ideas about education in general and higher education in particular that are haunting one of the most important endeavors of civilization.

What do we need to do to exorcise ourselves from these ideas? We need to become ardent defenders of our profession, and more active in securing what is now a right of all citizens: good and accessible education. We need to transform ourselves into more articulate defenders of our vocation. As Horace Mann said, we should "be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," only that this time that victory is not only to transform the minds of our students but also to transform the system that is ruining education as a vocation.

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