
Regional

Anti-intellectualism casts shadow over higher ed

In addition to all of the issues affecting higher education, like the lack of appropriate funding, diminishing enrollments, insularity, and the like, now it is time to recognize the biggest problem of all – anti-intellectualism.

Anti-intellectualism is defined as a negative attitude toward intellectual pursuits, whether in the form of education or scholarly activities and toward their practitioners, such as college professors and intellectuals in general.

Anti-intellectualism has been around for a long time and has been practiced by many regimes, particularly authoritarian ones. From Stalinism to Mao's "Cultural Revolution" and Cambodia's Pol Pot on the left, to fascist regimes like Mussolini's, Hitler's or Franco's on the right, this movement has extended itself into violent connotations to the point that writers, artists, college professors, or just people wearing glasses – seen as people with a level of literacy – have been murdered by the thousands by those from oppressive regimes.

In its milder forms in democratic societies like ours, intellectualism is being attacked verbally, mostly by populists, who say that intellectuals are "elitists," and are therefore detached from people everyday concerns. Ridicule is also a tool of anti-intellectualism. In a blander form it questions other "intellectuals" who have opposite points of view on topics ranging from climate change, biological evolution and to critics of "trickle down" economics.

Sometimes conservative critics in this country have used "intellectualist" as a pejorative term aimed at members of institutions of higher education.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

How to identify anti-intellectualism? It has many characteristics. One is denying science when its findings contradict the tenants of certain ideologies, religious beliefs, or economic interests. Anti-intellectualists are unmoved by facts by either ignoring them or inventing falsehoods. By being underterred by new information, they adhere to some sort of ideological purity and absolute belief in the scriptural literalism of revealed books such as the Bible or the Qur'an.

Anti-intellectuals also show a number of attitudes that include intolerance to dissent, hostile fear of progress, unwillingness to compromise, tribal mentality, an urge to control women's bodies and severe xenophobia. In this country, anti-intellectuals also display a pathological hatred of the U.S. government. In any case, all of them practice a demonization of education.

It is time for those of us involved in higher education in this country to recognize that there is a long shadow being cast on our institutions. Because the characteristics mentioned above to fight anti-intellectualism with reason are naive. We need to become smarter in the use of media to get our message across. But what is the message? That higher education makes us richer and happier.

This sounds like a populist message in itself, but

we need to appeal to the basic instincts of the people, and we do not need to lie to get there. The facts are on our side.

What this means is that we need to embrace a tectonic change in the way we portray ourselves. Glossy brochures that keep describing ourselves as "excellent," colleges and universities presented as sport brands, and the inability to inform the common citizen of how our work makes lives better, will not get us there.

Higher education needs champions and we cannot expect those champions to come from the political establishment or the world of entertainment. We need advocates from our own ranks and the first steps must be taken by the leaders of colleges and universities.

There was a time when college presidents were well respected individuals whose opinions made headlines in a positive way. But now because many college presidents – particularly those at public institutions – are in one way or another political appointees, they lack intellectual gravitas and remain in the shadows, only to be seen at sporting or fundraising events.

And what about faculty? Many of them see that any outreach effort is either a waste of time or something for which they are not really prepared. Furthermore, they know those efforts make no difference when it comes to attaining tenure and promotion, and for those who have already achieved the position of full professor, they either prefer to concentrate on their own research or to limit their efforts to the classes they have to teach.

That opens the door to outliers who constantly see themselves as the vocal critics of college administrations. In any case, they do not help the cause of higher education and actually work for those who would attack intellectualism. What they do not understand is that the social changes that are occurring regarding the image of higher education will sooner or later affect them by more demands to spend less time doing research and more time teaching, and what many perceive as perks such as sabbaticals or tenure will be eliminated.

Most faculty do not realize what a great job they have. They only have to work nine months a year. Nobody is really checking at what time they are coming or leaving campus, and they do not have bosses who are constantly looking over their shoulders. And on top of that, once they attain tenure they have a job for life.

That is why they are seen as members of an elite that spends taxpayers' money. It is because of this that faculty themselves and their institutions become an easy target for anti-intellectualism, of ridicule, and even hate.

Unless we become better and more forceful communicators, we will be losing the battle of public opinion and with that the respect and support of society. We can keep pointing fingers everywhere, but at the end of the day the responsibility will be ours and ours alone.

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