

Former Syracuse Professor Explains Why the University Should Not Be a Shopping Mall

As a colleague of mine [recently observed](#), today's high school students seem to be much more prone to choosing college alternatives than they were a few years ago.

Such observation is not a figment of imagination, but a reality across the globe, a fact which various sources confirm.

The [first source](#) is a poll out of the UK. It finds that only 75 percent of young students believe it is “‘important’ to go to university.” That sounds quite impressive... until one realizes the popularity of that answer has declined by 11 percent in the last five years. That's a dramatic drop.

The [second source](#) comes from the American side of the pond. As reported in *The Washington Post*, many American colleges and universities are panicking over the enrollment drops they've experienced in recent years. Seeking to restore this deficit, colleges are gambling on new degree programs in hopes of scoring new students. Some of these new options include:

- Peace Education (Elizabethtown College)
- HipHop Studies (Columbia College Chicago)
- Embodiment Studies (Goddard College)
- Food Studies (Dickinson College)
- Beer Fermentation (Central Michigan University)

It doesn't take a genius to realize that some of these areas may be best learned on-the-job and really don't need a degree. But another question which must be asked is whether or not these degree programs truly promote the advancement of wisdom and knowledge, for that is one of the main goals of education.

The importance of such wisdom, knowledge, and discussion at the university level was raised roughly 20 years ago by Rosaria Champagne, an English professor at Syracuse University specializing in Critical and Queer Theory. Due to a research project, Champagne began to question her thinking and activism in these fields. She revealed some of these ponderings in a speech given to incoming graduate students in August of 1999.

One interesting part of her speech is her evaluation of the university and some misconceptions that have crept into the system. [She notes](#):

“The university classroom is neither a shopping mall whose existence depends on disseminating the latest, sexiest critical approach, nor a museum, where ideas are valued because of tradition alone and where you can look but never touch. Instead, the classroom is a place of joy fueled by the quest for excellence and the productive fear generated by the awesomeness of our ignorance and our inability to transform human reason into wisdom on its own terms, when it is unhinged from a living God.”

Professor Champagne went on to tell students:

*“Enjoy the classroom. Enjoy the opportunity to touch the lives of others. Cherish the sacred relationship of student to teacher. **Learn how to adjust your focus.** Find ways to transmogrify the emotional manipulation or bad manners that some of your students will no doubt display as opportunities to turn the train around. Find ways to see past the symptom of seeming boredom or disrespect to its source, and then work from that. **Listen first – and listen last – and listen in between.**”*

In other words, Professor Champagne recognized the need for the university to engage with ideas, listen to the opinions of others, and approach learning with the attitude of humility

rather than know-it-all arrogance. Unfortunately, events on university campuses over the past several years show that such advice has been ignored.

The high cost of college is likely driving the enrollment decline that's making colleges and universities wring their hands and desperately add new degree programs. But is it possible that many colleges and universities wouldn't be experiencing as much of a decline if they had been advocating a higher standard of education all along, one which encouraged debate and an open discussion of solid wisdom and ideas?

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