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Developing Leaders, Not Followers

John Petillo, President of Sacred Heart University

HuffPost College, The Blog, October 14, 2014

For decades, colleges and universities throughout the United States have attempted to strike the right balance between "book smarts" - developing the intellect and character of students - and "street smarts" - giving students the skills they need to get and keep a job.

But the recent news that [40 percent of all those unemployed in the country are millennials](http://www.marketwatch.com/story/40-of-unemployed-workers-are-millennials-2014-07-03) <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/40-of-unemployed-workers-are-millennials-2014-07-03> tells us that the balance still is far from adequate; there is serious and urgent work to do in all institutions of higher learning to serve our students better.

But what should that service look like?

Over the past months, a heated debate has arisen within some of the country's most prestigious higher education institutions concerning the nature of student formation. This debate has been stoked by William Deresiewicz's recent book, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, which chastises the best American universities for producing student "zombies" who are highly capable of winning top jobs, but generally clueless when it comes to questions of individual identity or life purpose.

Mr. Deresiewicz's book therefore complicates our perception of elite education as the golden ticket for our young people. The production of skilled workers without a deep understanding of self or the ability to think broadly, creatively and critically does not bode well for the future. This hollow approach also limits the university's capacity to help prepare the kind of leaders we need today: bold yet thoughtful, decisive yet empathetic, knowledgeable yet open to new ideas.

It seems clear that the liberal arts have a foundational role to play in avoiding such a fate. Curricula that press students to actively wrestle with their own beliefs and values - through writing, classroom debate and independent reflection - help to ensure that they are not afraid of their individuality or the pursuit of their deepest passions. Additionally, such curricula can expose students to novel ideas and perspectives, provide a deep sense of ethics and values and engender student learning fueled by the burning desire to know more.

We have seen time and time again that this type of learning is the most successful and enduring, allowing young people to become not just leaders, but also good and decent human beings. So how can we place the liberal arts at the center of the university, while also giving our students the training they need to put their valuable knowledge to work following graduation?

Many higher education institutions are attempting to address this conundrum, experimenting with curricular innovations and reconfigured student services. Yet during a time of aggressive experimentation, there also is value in strengthening core structures that have been proven to work well. At Sacred Heart University, we have drawn on a traditional standard of collegiate

learning, the "freshman core," and made it the gateway for student excellence in the book-smarts department. Rather than orienting the common core around a set canon, we instead focus on "the human journey," which enables students to ask - and begin to answer - profound questions regarding their own identity and place in the world. In this sense, we press our students to avoid sheep-like behavior, instead inviting them to find their own uniqueness within the context of the broader human experience.

But we also recognize that newly discovered identity must be put to good use out in the world. Beyond providing intensive recruitment opportunities and job resources on campus, we also encourage students who have not yet settled on a course of study to participate in our "[Majors in Success](http://www.sacredheart.edu/officeservices/careerdevelopmentplacement/students/majorinsuccessprogram/)" program <http://www.sacredheart.edu/officeservices/careerdevelopmentplacement/students/majorinsuccessprogram/>. This program assesses student talents to create an academic plan geared towards skill-building directly applicable to opportunities in the job market. Equally, we actively help students decide whether graduate school might be an appropriate path for expanded preparation for employment opportunities in the future.

These multifaceted efforts do not always draw directly upon many of the cutting-edge higher educational practices that are becoming more widespread, nor do they focus on promoting the liberal arts, alone. Instead, they represent our very best attempt to discover that elusive balance required for young people to become self-reflective, highly prepared leaders in the world we know today. Because in today's global economy, we need to encourage all of our graduates to lead, while also providing them with the skills required to do so.