

by Michael Barron

The Business of Education

Response to “Marketing Higher Education: The Survival Value of Integrity” on page 40

John Silber was no stranger to debate, strong opinion or controversy and this speech/article upholds the best traditions of what many have called his tendency to evoke “Silber shockers” when making a point or responding to critics and reporters. Still, Silber speaks to the very heart of the academy about its integrity and ethics, and does so in timeless fashion through the decades to our current era since this 1979 delivery to the American Council on Education, printed in 1980. In typical Silber fashion, we are not left off the hook by the passage of more than 30 years. The issues of his day in this regard remain ours with which to grapple.

Don't be misled by his introduction, which characterizes the “business of education” as inevitable and necessary in spite of how the academy decries terms, such as “sales” and “marketing.” Using the vehicle of the admission office, Silber tackles everything from privilege to open admission and gives more than a little ink to the consequences of offering admission to “those who are almost certain to end in utter failure.” Silber reminds us that we must deliver what we purport to be in terms of true higher learning and not be seduced into offering an education that becomes devoid of principle in the name of breadth or inclusion. In Silber's words, “If we abandon the principles of academic integrity—without a public declaration announcing the fact—we shall be engaging in a very serious piece of marketing fraud.” The very fact that he would use such a business reference in his time is extraordinary and almost seems prophetic given the issues of our time.

He warns of the “cultural drift of the age” wherein higher education was being renamed as *postsecondary* education: an era marked by what he saw as the watering down of the



curriculum in some of America's best and most emulated universities. It strikes me that we have a similar parallel in our age in that higher education has many detractors who question whether the true benefits of obtaining the education are worth the price paid in both dollars and effort. Many are asking for metrics and governmental oversight. NACAC's own Statement of Principles of Good Practice (SPGP) seeks to define the behavior of institutions in the admission process and to maintain standards for all who participate in the process.

Our present day society searches for ways to decode the educational claims from the myriad institutions that have emerged in the American system of higher education and the blurring of the metrics that we once felt were the pillars of comparison. Perhaps the issues and rancor surrounding the rankings publications of our age are symptomatic of the “cultural drift” Silber decries. Perhaps the current efforts at governmental control reflect the “retribution” he foretold when he opined “the consumers—our students and parents who demand truth in selling

of others—will at length turn their full attention to us.” Silber argues that we “must stand for something” even when it is “inconvenient to do so.”

Silber had strong opinions about the issues of his day, surrounding what he saw as the erosion of standards in the curriculum, the oversimplification of admission standards without understanding the importance of true preparation for higher education, and the rise of economic self-interest in both institutions and faculty. It seems to this writer that we have parallels in this age as well: ranking systems and their methodologies; creative methods for excluding or including certain populations in our profiles; questions of institutional quality as delivery mechanisms move away from the traditional classroom; the use of intermediaries in the admission process; the role of traditional measures in determining admission (tests, grades, etc.); and the pressures to increase net tuition revenue... the list could go on and on.

Perhaps we should hark back to Silber's advice in what some might see as an unusual spate of optimism from this outspoken critic of and advocate for higher education. “If we maintain our integrity, we shall have grounds for optimism” that we will weather the storms of criticism and the fierceness of scrutiny that seem to define our age.



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