

UC Merced

AIARU: Panel 3 - General Education and the Research University

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**Academic Innovation and the American Research University
Symposium**

University of California, Merced
November 13, 2009

Panel #3: General Education and the Research University

Q/A

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SOE Distinguished Chair Professor

Chancellor; Professor of Engineering, UC Merced

GENE BLOCK

So we're actually [*applause*]. We're running about five minutes past--I think we began at 1:15, 1:17 to be precise, I was watching it very closely. And so we're a little bit over but I have a credibility problem here, I said we were going to engage the audience. We failed to engage the audience because faculty speak long.

It's interesting, when people are being interviewed on the news, people who are not faculty, they usually give one of two word responses to questions. Have you ever noticed, faculty give much longer responses but it was interesting and I think that it was justified because it was very interesting material. I'll throw out an issue though and let's see if there's any resonance to this issue.

At UCLA, because of the enormous budget problems, which I just, for all of us, is that we're all struggling on every campus, we've challenged the deans and department chairs to tell us why they need more than 45 units of, of disciplinary focus for a major. We're saying that we think majors may have accreted too many courses over the years, and that tell us why your majors need to be as long as they are. Now, the, the logic for this, the reason for this is, is simple, that if we have fewer upper division courses we can shift the fewer faculty we're going to have, because we're shrinking, in terms of our faculty, we can shrink, we can move more of them to the lower division classes and serve more students. So there is, you know, the reason for this, but there's another intellectual reason, that it frees up an opportunity for students to do more in terms of their general education by not focusing so much on their, their majors. And, and our concern is that most of our students, of course, don't go on for PhDs. They use those majors to become lawyers and doctors and, and other areas. And the question is how much disciplinary focus do you really need?

And I'm just wondering from your perceptions as academics, do you see that problem too, that majors have, over the years have gotten more involved and, and whether that's justifiable or not. So, I'll leave that open for the panel and the audience. Is that, is that something that you're thinking about? Is it something that you sense? Or am I off in the wrong direction here on this?

GREGG CAMFIELD

I think you're off in the right direction. Certainly that's what Derek Bok talks about a great deal in his rather influential book. But I think that it happens in part because each of us sees a discipline growing, and the amount of knowledge in it has grown so much and in some cases its absolutely necessary. In engineering, and ABET's [Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology] going to say, students have to know all this stuff, there's no way around it. Or there are examinations in various professional schools. But I think that if we're thinking of, of knowledge delivery as this body of, of stuff, the major has to keep getting bigger as the, as the horizons of the major get bigger. And what we have to recognize is that nobody can master it. Nobody, not our graduate students. So the idea of trying to cover everything in a major is a mistake, but we have to fight against that tendency.

LINDA KATEHI

I'd like to follow on this. I'd say the biggest--you're absolutely correct and how you correct this problem. Most of the education in professional disciplines is based on providing knowledge, alright? So the core of the education is just doing that. And then what you do is that you leave the skills for the end, what we call design, alright; it's all about developing those skills. It needs to be brought inside out. I think if your core is the skills or the professional skills, and then you build on that and you grow the knowledge. The web could provide that, people will learn every moment after they graduate. It's not just the end of learning, it's just the beginning. So if you create a curriculum that really emphasizes the skills rather than the knowledge, then you will allow those individuals to learn by themselves. And that will require fewer credit hours, as a matter of fact, to get that. I can only tell you that I've spent a lot of years preaching that to the engineering community, and I'm still working on this [laughter] so it's not, it's not something that is done easily because the curriculum we have in place which we

want to change has been developed for many, many years, and it's a difficult task.

BLOCK

Is there any audience questions? Please.

**CHRISTOPHER
VINEY**

Just an observation that we're receiving, were going to do things with the four-year degree. And as the schools are preparing students less adequately for what they face when they get to university, there's the body of knowledge we find that we need to make somebody competently employable increases. You either have to add, and this is what they've been doing in Europe, and doing not just in Britain but in Europe, you add a year into the undergrad curriculum. So four-year degrees have become five-year degrees, the Scottish three-year degree has become a four-year degree and a lot of the, the pressure to teach what is really necessary to go and be useful at a disciplinary level is turning into, is turning into a fifth year sort of taught masters-type program. So, you know, part of the debate as we look far out into the future and we have commissions looking at that, perhaps the four-year degree itself will have to come under scrutiny.

BLOCK

Yes?

PRITH BANERJEE

I'm going to make a very very provocative statement. I was intrigued by Professor [Christopher] Viney's statements about general education at Oxford and Cambridge. I would say that it doesn't matter what you did there, the output would be fantastic. Because of the selectivity of students that go to Oxford and Cambridge. I went to undergraduate school at IIT [Indian Institute of Technology] in India. The curriculum, I'm making a statement, was not fantastic but the selectivity was amazing. Out of what was 500,000 students, 1000 students get in so whatever they brought us, [*inaudible*] [*laughter*]--So now here is the part that I'm saying

I [*inaudible*] UC Merced you need to develop an approach which is appropriate for the student population that you have agreed on. Please don't get me wrong. The point is that, some of the ideas about the ways of creating general education if you did that in the--today's higher end schools, right? It makes a lot of sense, I mean but I think Merced right now should really focus on what would make it attractive to your current generation students which I suspect to be the students that were attracted by the Morrill Act.

BLOCK

Other comments? Well, we've run a little over but I think--*[gestures to Viney]* oh, sorry.

VINEY

Sir, if I may make a comment about this sort of activity works in very strange ways. It's, it's been changing. It's part of their adaptability, I think why they're still in business is. And when the government back in, in the late 1990s were, were wondering about, well, why does it cost, why should the taxpayer pay more to send people to two universities? It's changed some of the pattern of access to the universities, so there was an adaptability there. And you, you will find every year when admissions are being, taking place, there will be angry letters in the Times of London saying, "My, my son or daughter got six, eight classes at A level," which is a high school leaving exam, "and they didn't get into Oxford." And, you know, somebody from Oxford writes back, you know, "But they were totally unteachable." *[laughter]* And so, so what they're trying to do, they really are sensitive to, to this idea of elitism. And we're not above that at the UC where we would have a standard, you know, it is a selective process, perhaps not such a, such a, such a tight one, but you're quite right to, to say that we should be flexible, adaptable to what we're using to select and which people we're aiming at...*[Camfield interrupts]*

CAMFIELD

But I think your question has much more to do with if the student is underprepared and wants a business degree, we should give `em the concrete, narrow focus business degree.

BANERJEE

That's what I was saying. I think right now you're trying to get a large customer base, right? And students, potentially in Central Valley, I think the reason Merced was located here is that the community here, the student, the school that the president mentioned, President [Mark] Yudof mentioned, right? Those 2,980 students, those they would like to come here. And you should give them such a fantastic education that they succeed in life, right? And provide them an economic transformation, which will motivate the next generation of students to come to Merced, and so on. Long term what you are doing is the right thing, but I am saying, but short term you needed to cater to the students that are potentially coming from different backgrounds.

The reason I'm saying this is because when I was at the University of Illinois in Chicago, we were trying to do the same thing that you at UC are trying to do. And I took a very pragmatic approach, knowing what the constraints were and that actually worked. The students that came to UIC, were not going to graduate in four years, unlike your students at your UC, right? These students were not staying in a residential college. They were doing work to pay for college, right? They're considered completely different and so the approach we took at UIC for those students was, was something that would enable the UIC undergraduate students to succeed. And I think that, that's all I'm saying. Please don't get me wrong.

BLOCK

Yeah, so let me thank you. Very profound discussion actually about the role of universities and it's too bad we don't have more time because this is really worth, worth pursuing but lots of interesting issues raised. Clearly it's a work in progress for all of us, general education. And I'd like to thank all the panelists today for your preparation and your very insightful comments. So thank you. [*applause*]

STEVE KANG

In my opinion, it was a very exciting day. And I thank all the panelists for all the sessions and the audience and your careful listening to promote more lively discussion. And a lot of things came out of it so what we like to do is, I would like to ask each panel group leaders to come up with some short summary, later on; it doesn't have to be today. We will collect that input and eventually we'd like to come up with some good summary over this exciting Symposium so that I can submit to our Regent [George] Marcus. Otherwise he threaten to take the money back, so, but overall, I thank you very much. It was a really wonderful day. I am sure that this will help to form a stronger basis for UC Merced be even more successful in the future. So I thank you very much and have a wonderful day. Thank you. [*applause*]