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Abstract

A Commentary on "The Origins of Underperformance in Higher Education: Proximal Systems of Influence"
by Michael Moscolo and Jose Castillo

How much do we really value learning?

Carol Ann Sharicz

A Commentary on "The Origins of Underperformance in Higher Education: Proximal Systems of Influence' by Michael Moscolo and Jose Castillo

The research presented and discussed in this manuscript is fascinating and well-documented. I read this manuscript from a systems lens which means that in addition to the interconnecting issues that were discussed in this manuscript, I found myself seeing two salient dynamics become paramount to this discussion on the underperformance in higher education. I was thinking that the more we get to the fundamental reasons for something, the more we are dealing with the absolute essence of that phenomenon. Please note that the other factors that were discussed in this manuscript are critically important as points for discussion and change. However, the focus here stems from a key principle in systems thinking which is, *our beliefs (including also values and motives) influence our behaviors*. There were two such overriding belief systems operating that are indeed influencing the subpar academic behaviors that were discussed in this manuscript. The first motivation that seems significantly critical is the shift from having a mastery motivation, i.e., having a desire to master their respective subject matter, to an increased focus on grades, resulting in a “minimal performance to acquire a passing grade.” Tied into this grade mentality is the consumer driven mentality...being “entitled to a degree.” Perhaps the more disturbing statement made in this entire thesis came from a student who declared, “I would take a course in which I would learn little or nothing but would receive an A.” If one were to step way back and look at the global and economic dynamics taking place, it doesn't take long to see that there are many other nations competing on critical and creative thinking, entrepreneurial skills, new markets and products that far exceed just getting a certain grade.

The other salient and absolutely fundamental skill that really undergirds all of an undergraduate degree (or any degree) is how many hours are devoted to academic study. As was well-documented in this study, “the number of hours spent studying per week has remained steady at about 14 hours over the past decade.” Now because we all have the same finite number of hours in a week, when it is also being reported that students spend “on average 14 hours per week texting; 6.5 hours talking with friends on the telephone; 5 hours per week on social networking sites and 11 hours per week watching videos,” one can see that the student is valuing those other outlets more than shifting that attention to more hours studying.

So, for me, those two areas alone, if they could shift to a more serious attention to regaining a belief or value for education and then devoting the time to studying and mastering a subject matter, which in itself is a discipline, then the other issues discussed could be more easily addressed; i.e., the fragmentation in curriculum, new learning pedagogies, etc., but until we have the foundation of students and parents valuing learning and putting the time into it, then how will we truly advance our knowledge base and, concomitantly, our nation?