

Nine Flawed Assumptions of Higher Education Reform

Statement of the FGCU Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Higher Ed Reform

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An FGCU Faculty Senate Ad Hoc committee met to analyze and draft an initial response, from the faculty perspective, to some of the assumptions that seem to underlie current calls for a radical “reform” of higher education in Florida and across the nation.

We agreed that a detailed, point – by – point response to any particular proposal would be premature. Since there are a wide variety of models and solutions under consideration, selecting any one specific problematic proposal and addressing it might serve to elevate its legitimacy as a serious proposal when it may still be no more than an ill-formed thought experiment.

Instead, we focused our efforts on understanding and addressing some of the underlying assumptions embedded in two recently – circulated documents that are of most immediate concern to FGCU, namely the [letter sent by Governor Rick Scott to President Bradshaw](#) and Governor Rick Perry of Texas’s much-discussed [Seven Breakthrough Solutions for Higher Education](#), which seem to have influenced Governor Scott’s understanding of the issues at stake.

Our analysis identified nine misperceptions about the condition of state-supported higher education in Florida that appear to be driving the debate. In highlighting these nine items, we seek to focus attention on the significant differences between the true quality and value of the traditional American model of higher education, and the flawed or incomplete perceptions of quality and value that appear to be driving these recent “reform” proposals. In the following pages we undertake a more careful, but still preliminary, critical analysis; we encourage the Faculty Senate and all faculty and administrators to read these in conjunction with the original source documents.

1. The basic model of higher education in the US is fundamentally flawed and must be overhauled.
2. Course and degree offerings should be determined and controlled based on centralized, governmental decisions.
3. There is a discrepancy between student degrees and employers’ needs, and employers’ needs should be the first priority in determining higher education policy for Florida.
4. STEM degree programs are the most valuable and deserving of funding, while degrees in humanities and social sciences are less useful.
5. Perceived deficiencies in the preparation of college graduates is in large part a result of faulty or ineffective teaching.
6. Teaching and research are distinct activities and their funding should be split.
7. Teaching performance will be greatly enhanced by a merit pay system using monetary incentives.
8. Students can be viewed as “consumers;” student evaluations are the most reliable method of assessing “consumer satisfaction,” and “consumer satisfaction” in education is a valid measurement of educational outcomes.

9. There is currently insufficient assessment of teaching and program quality; the costs associated with increased assessment are justified by the results in terms of improved outcomes.

Based on these assumptions, some sweeping and potentially destructive solutions are being proposed. Bizarrely, some political actors who are normally free-market advocates in all other industries are in this case proposing to replace a functioning, internationally competitive education marketplace with a State-directed system in which political decisions taken at the level of the State or Federal governments replace the decisions of individual students and of trained professional educators. Currently, students make informed decisions about their own educational futures and the University system attempts to match supply to student demand.

The late Cornell economist George Staller said that the transition from a free-market environment to a state controlled economy was “like turning an aquarium into fish soup,” a relatively easy process because all the ingredients are in place. It is far more difficult, according to his experience in assisting Eastern European economies after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to turn fish soup back into a thriving aquarium.

Before any radical solutions are imposed, it is important to fully understand the problem(s) they purport to address. As in any discipline, educational decisions should be evidence-based. Taxpayers have the right to know their money is not being wasted, but that includes money spent on duplicative and unnecessary efforts for college reform that yield little new information and no improvements. Any short- or long-range reforms should take into account all the facts and the considerable body of research that already exists.

We have identified the following flawed assumptions in in the higher education reform movement which should be challenged:

Assumption #1: The foundational premise of the proposed reform is that the current system of higher education in the US is “broken” and needs radical structural revision.

The wisdom of the global marketplace for higher education indicates that this is a deeply flawed assumption. A nation’s competitive advantage in any industry is demonstrated by the power that industry commands in the global marketplace. The U.S. model of higher education is arguably the most competitive in the world, demonstrated both by our balance of trade and by the degree to which other systems are seeking to emulate ours.

Our balance of trade in education, as described in [an October 2011 report](#) from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Labor Statistics, is strongly positive and has continued to grow over the past three years, at a time when other U.S. goods and services have faced challenges. From 2008 to 2010, our nation’s “exports” of education increased from \$18b to \$21.3b. China and India, some of our fiercest competitors in global marketplaces, are the two largest consumers of our higher education system. Our trade surplus in education has grown from \$12.8b to \$15.6b during this time. The global marketplace recognizes the significant, competitive value of U.S. higher education.

Since the Bologna Declaration of 1999, European Community nations have worked to harmonize their divergent University systems, with many of the key elements of [the European plan](#) bearing strong similarities to our model of higher education.

Our educational system can certainly be improved. Any system this large and this complex must undergo continuous improvement or its capabilities will decay. But it is questionable whether the higher education model itself is “broken” to the degree that radical structural changes need to be deployed in order to “fix” it. The U.S. is currently a major leader in educational research, a major exporter of higher education expertise, and the leading destination for foreign nationals seeking a top-quality education (For detailed data, see: [Institute of International Education, Open Doors](#) report 2010.)

It is not surprising that public dissatisfaction with the ever-increasing costs of higher education has risen in conjunction with nationwide defunding of public educational institutions and the transfer of expenses from the state government to the student. However, we need to distinguish between funding issues, which affect things like class size, curriculum offerings, staffing and infrastructure resources, and the basic model of higher education itself.

Assumption #2: Better economic and educational outcomes will be obtained if the government determines which subjects are “useful,” eliminate those that are “not relevant,” and sets goals for how many students should be graduated in each major field based on employers’ needs.¹

The new wave of “reform” seems to be suggesting a centrally-planned model similar to that implemented in the old Soviet Union or in Maoist China, in which the government decided which subjects should be taught, based on measures of “utility” and “relevance” established by central planners. Some European countries also limit access to higher education based on anticipated demand for certain skills.

In contrast, traditional higher education in the US is based on a free-market model, where educator interests and student demand combine to offer a broad and constantly changing array of courses, and students are free to pick their areas of study.

Before we abandon this model, we should look carefully into how successful the centralized, top-down models have been at promoting economic health and high rates of employment.

We would argue that the Soviet- and Mao-style approach did not work, even in the short term. In France, where students are trained for very specific jobs based on anticipated industry needs, the top-down system has resulted in massive unemployment of young people trained for narrowly specific jobs that turned out not to exist.

¹ This can be seen most strikingly in Governor Scott’s announcement in an October 10th interview that his top priority in reforming Florida’s college and university system would be in “shifting funding to degrees that have the best job prospects” and on prioritizing support for STEM disciplines over subjects like anthropology and psychology. It is also implicit in question H in Governor Scott’s Oct 13th letter to President Bradshaw: “Do you have measurable goals for the number of graduates with degrees in specific fields such as science, technology, engineering, nursing etc?”

No central planner knows what is really necessary or what will be useful in the future. One of the few courses Steve Jobs completed in his formal education was a calligraphy course at Reed College. He considered this course, and the eccentric professor who taught it, to have been the greatest influence on his development as a designer and innovator of electronics. You never know what will be a formative experience.

An unspoken corollary in this is the assumption that students are not majoring in STEM subjects because universities are not encouraging them to do so. In fact, many entering students think initially that they will major in STEM subjects, but change their minds later. The number of STEM majors graduating depends largely on student motivation and how well prepared they are for college level work, not on any decisions the college makes.

Assumption #3: The economic problems of the present are mostly due to a mismatch between the skills of new college graduates and the kinds of jobs available to them. We need to focus our resources on filling the immediate needs of employers for technical and vocational training.²

Historically, liberal arts education has been distinguished from vocational training. A vocational program teaches students how to do a particular job or type of work. It is narrow and focused on mastering a specific skill set or body of knowledge.

A liberal arts education prepares students to recognize, analyze and solve unfamiliar problems, independently seek out information, judge its quality and use it to master complex and unfamiliar subject matter, ask new questions and integrate information and skills across multiple disciplines and fields.

We believe that the liberal arts model has lost none of its value, and is indeed even more necessary as the pace of change accelerates.

Students trained in a narrow vocational path are at the mercy of a constantly evolving workplace. If the market for a specific skill set dries up, they cannot adapt and must seek new training in a different set of skills. A true liberal arts degree does not prepare students for any particular job; it gives them the ability to master new skills and knowledge rapidly and intelligently, or apply what they have learned to new situations.

This is why many large companies recruit graduates directly from the top liberal arts colleges and universities, and why the top professional schools look for applicants with broad and deep liberal arts backgrounds. A bright person who is able to think critically, master new information rapidly and communicate effectively can easily be trained to do a specific job. However, people who are trained for a particular job but lack a good general education will not be critical thinkers, good communicators, out-of-the-box problem solvers or creative innovators, and will not be able to adapt to changes and innovation in tomorrow's workplace.

² Governor Scott argues in his Oct 13th letter to President Bradshaw, for example, that “the biggest challenge Floridians face is finding a job” and he specifically asks whether FGCU has “measurable goals to meet employers’ current needs.”

Decades of experience have shown that a good liberal arts education is the best preparation for advanced studies in sciences and technical subjects, education, administration, law, public service, business and the arts. The more broad an education a person brings to the challenges of life, the better they will be prepared to meet those challenges.

Assumption #4: Some subjects are more relevant and useful than others. Educational institutions should stop “wasting” taxpayer dollars on teaching humanities, arts and social-science subjects and spend more on technical, scientific and business-related subjects.³

The goal of higher education, especially the four-year bachelor’s degree, is first of all to educate students to become responsible, informed citizens of a free republic, and secondarily, to teach them the knowledge and skills needed to make a living, participate in the economy and advance the common good. These goals of education were articulated in the United States by Thomas Jefferson, among others, and have never been seriously challenged since.⁴

The four most important foundations a student needs in order to become a broadly and deeply educated person over the life course are (1) critical thinking and analysis skills, (2) independent research and study skills (3) communications skills, especially reading and writing, and (4) broad cultural and historical knowledge, which is needed to contextualize information.

These foundations are most successfully learned when a student is fully engaged and intellectually excited by subject matter, regardless of what the subject matter is. Independent research, analysis, problem-solving, communication and general background knowledge can be learned in every type of course, as long as the student is engaged and motivated.

Recent studies have shown that more learning occurs in the humanities and social sciences disciplines whose utility is being questioned than in any other field of study. The recently published book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), which has been used to argue that there is a crisis in student learning in college, in fact conclusively demonstrated the relationship between teaching strategies associated with humanities and social science fields and successful student learning outcomes. Students who took classes with more than 40 pages of reading per week and more than 20 pages of writing per semester gained the most knowledge over the course of a 4 year degree, with the result that students majoring in liberal arts fields see "significantly higher gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills over time than students in other fields of study." Students majoring in more vocational fields such as business, education, social work and communications showed the smallest gains, raising further question marks over the assumption that vocational training is a more useful means of job preparation than the liberal

³ Again, this was clearly seen in Governor Scott’s October 10th declaration that his top priority would be shifting funding to degrees that he perceived to have the best job prospects and his insistence that the “Florida doesn’t need a lot more anthropologists in the state.”

⁴ On August 13, 1786, Jefferson wrote to his legal advisor, George Wythe, "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness...Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish & improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [tyranny, oppression, etc.] and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance."

arts. The evidence for intensive reading and writing as the most effective means of ensuring student learning also challenges the assumption that the most efficient way of teaching students is in large group lecture sections, where intensive reading and writing assignments are difficult to apply.

The evidence shows, then, that art, anthropology and philosophy are no less powerful educational tools than the STEM subjects. For many students they will be much *more* powerful. We do not know what will ignite a student's motivation and curiosity; students have to find their own way into that receptive state. Without engagement, they will not be motivated to persist long enough to acquire the foundation of skills they need to succeed. Being able to take a range of courses and learn in different modalities and disciplines is critical to student success.

Assumption #5: Perceived deficiencies in the educational outcomes of college graduates are significantly influenced by deficiencies in the quality of teachers and / or in teaching methodologies.⁵

In liberal-arts subjects, the competition to become an employed college teacher is intense and never-ending. For many years now there have been far more highly-qualified new PhDs emerging from top graduate programs than there are entry-level jobs teaching in colleges. Institutions can use their hiring opportunities to select from an enormous pool of talent, and excellent teaching skills are one of the main criteria used in selecting job candidates. In tenure-granting institutions, teaching is increasingly a key factor in achieving tenure, while systems of post-tenure review have been put into place to ensure continued excellence. As a result, the quality of teaching faculty has never been higher than in the last fifteen years.

Currently, teaching quality is assessed by a number of different measures, most of which are evaluated on a yearly basis. These include supervisor and peer evaluations, tracking incoming and outgoing student performance, measures of student achievement of learning outcomes and goals, as well as student evaluations of performance. All of these are in place to capitalize on teaching strengths and identify and improve on weaknesses.

Assumption #6: Research and teaching are opposed and mutually exclusive enterprises. Splitting the research and teaching budgets will result in better outcomes for students and more cost-efficiency.⁶

Again, experience has demonstrated the value of integrating teaching and research. Research informs and energizes teaching; teaching similarly inspires research. Most academics engaged in both activities will testify that they are better researchers because they teach, and better teachers and mentors because they do research. Undergraduate and even high school curricula are enriched when students participate in professional -level research activities with their teachers, and are encouraged to develop questions of their own. Undergraduate research has been proven to advance student learning significantly.

⁵ This can be seen in Texas Solutions 1, 2 and 4, all of which emphasize the need to improve teaching effectiveness and efficiency.

⁶ Texas Solution # 3, for example, is "split research and teaching budgets to encourage excellence in both."

“Research” should also be defined accurately: it is not only what goes on in laboratories and is funded by government or industry grants, but anything that pushes forward the boundaries of human knowledge. The vast majority of University faculty engage in research, both theoretical and applied, in order to advance knowledge within and across their academic fields. Much of this research is conducted without any additional cost to the university as a part of faculty member’s integrated roles as teachers, scholars and public servants.

Assumption #7: Teacher performance is pervasively lagging because teachers are not given incentives to improve. Competitive incentives such as merit pay will encourage better teaching.⁷

There is no evidence to support any of these assumptions. Good teachers teach well because teaching well is easier and more rewarding than teaching badly. The reasons for poor teaching are varied, but lack of monetary incentive is not one of them. Providing competitive incentives will therefore not improve the poor teachers or motivate the good ones. Instead, resources should be spent on understanding the sources of any problems in achieving course goals and student outcomes, and on providing support that will help improve areas of weakness.

Additionally, monetary incentives encourage focusing on the monetary rewards of teaching rather than on the intrinsic rewards of teaching. Teachers concentrate on the quality of their classes and are motivated by satisfaction in seeing student improvement and mastery of course material. They should not be encouraged to manipulate their courses and teaching methodology, which take away focus from teaching and put that focus on financial incentives.

We are in favor of rewarding excellent teaching, but are concerned about how “excellence” is measured. It is very dangerous to base teacher compensation on flawed methods of assessment, that will give an incentive to “game the system”.

Assumption #8: Students are consumers; student evaluations are the most important measure of customer satisfaction and educational success.⁸

Student evaluations are a useful tool and a well-designed instrument often yields valid information when rightly interpreted in context. However, it is very questionable whether students taking courses are the best judge of what is necessary or good for them in the long run. As most students are at the beginning of adulthood, they are lacking the knowledge and experience needed in order to make meaningful assessment of their teachers and classes. They may not understand the reason for certain teaching methods and approaches. The in-class experience with a particular teacher may feel positive at the time, but the student may come in underprepared, or the curriculum may not be well-designed. A student may not be prepared for college work, and attribute the problem to the teacher instead of to his own work habits or preparation. Students will not know what they are missing until years later, when they discover the gaps in their educations.

⁷ Texas solution #2 for example emphasizes the need to “create a financial incentive to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching.”

⁸ The idea of students as consumers most clearly underpins Texas Solution # 5 which asks for the creation of learning contracts between Deans, department heads, and teachers that “clearly state the promises of the Degree program to each student.” SAI scores are noted as the key determinant of success in teaching in Texas Solutions 1, 2 and 4.

Research has shown that student evaluations may give relatively higher scores to charismatic teachers who teach “fun” subjects or who grade leniently even when their courses are poorly designed or not very rigorous. Research shows that student evaluations of lower-level or core courses are lower than those for upper-level courses or those in their major. If teacher merit pay depends on high student evaluation scores, teachers will have an incentive to make their courses less demanding and inflate grades. Students may be happier, but they will learn less.

Finally, associating a college degree as a product “purchased” by customers gives students a false expectation and perception of the experience of higher education. A degree and the entire learning experience it encompasses are not commodities to be bought; the very act of buying implies a passive role on the student’s behalf. Let us not forget the student’s responsibility in actively earning their degree; they must take an active role in learning and rouse their motivation, determination, and perseverance.

Assumption #9: There is insufficient assessment of teachers, programs and institutions in higher education.⁹

All state universities already undergo multiple layers of program and institution-level assessment as part of their accreditation procedures. FGCU, for example, maintains accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (SACS) as well as a variety of professional accrediting agencies for particular degree programs in fields such as Engineering, Business, Counseling, Social Work and Nursing. This entails meeting accountability measures such as annual program assessments and seven-year program reviews, creating academic learning compacts for each undergraduate and graduate degree program, in addition to individual faculty professional development plans and annual reports. Assessment is time-consuming and expensive, and care should be taken to ensure it does not swallow up resources that would otherwise be spent educating students, and contribute to the further expansion of administrative layers. New accountability measures should not be duplicative, and deregulation and cost/benefit analyses should be considered here as well as in other areas of operation.

⁹ Governor Scott’s letter to President Bradshaw, for example, asks whether FGCU has “measureable goals for each graduate in the areas of writing proficiency and critical thinking” and whether we “conduct 360-degree reviews with the Board of Trustees”, demonstrating a lack of familiarity with the huge amount of data that is collected in institutional and program level review and the multiple ways in which this is disseminated, discussed and acted upon.