

**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING GETS STAMP OF APPROVAL
FROM THE BOYER COMMISSION**

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ABSTRACT

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching funded the Boyer Commission to investigate the state of undergraduate education at research universities in the United States. The main conclusion of the commission was that undergraduate students frequently got less than what they paid for in terms of education. The commission made a ten point recommendation built around experiential learning for improving the state of undergraduate education at these universities.

INTRODUCTION

Research Universities in the United States have done a credible and laudable job of finding and refining new knowledge. However, how has their performance been in the important area of undergraduate education? The Boyer Commission was set up to investigate this question. The commission found that these universities have done an inadequate job in delivering a quality education to undergraduates. In the language of the commission, undergraduate students are treated as second class citizens who are required to pay the full cost but are served leftovers. The commission developed a set of ten recommendations to improve the state of undergraduate education at research universities.

First, we present background information about the Boyer commission. Then we present shortcomings of research universities in the area of undergraduate education. This is followed by a discussion of the ten point agenda proposed by the commission to fix the shortcomings that were identified. Finally, we discuss the relevance of the recommendations to experiential learning.

THE BOYER COMMISSION

A national commission on educating undergraduates at research universities was set up in 1995 to investigate the state of undergraduate education at research universities and make appropriate recommendations. The commission was funded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and chaired by its president, Dr. Earnest L. Boyer.

SHORTCOMINGS

The Boyer Commission report (1998) identified several shortcomings of research universities in the domain of undergraduate education. Undergraduate students are often taught by untrained teaching assistants. At other times, undergraduate students are taught by tenured faculty members who make no effort to engage the minds of the students. The undergraduates are lured into the research university with the promise of being taught by world class professors. But such professors almost never teach undergraduate classes. They graduate with a set of courses but do not have any idea about how one body of knowledge is used with another. The research universities, according to the commission, have failed to look after the interests of the undergraduate students.

A TEN POINT AGENDA

The Boyer commission suggests a ten point agenda aimed at correcting the shortcomings. The ten points in the agenda are discussed below.

The first point in the ten point agenda is that research based learning should be the standard. The main idea here is that students should learn through involvement in research projects.

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The second point is that the freshman year should be inquiry based. The basic idea is that undergraduate students should be introduced to inquiry based learning in the very first year of college through their participation in small seminars taught by experienced faculty. The seminars should deal with topics that encourage students to ask questions so they will understand the dimensions of the issues at stake. The third point is that the follow up course work should build on the freshman year. In general, every course must be reexamined to ask how students can become active learners instead of being passive learners.

The fourth point is that barriers to interdisciplinary education should be removed. Since reality is quite complex, students need to have mental flexibility. They need to view their studies through many lenses. Interdisciplinary courses/ majors help them develop this mental flexibility. The fifth point is that communication skills should be improved in every course. Students should be routinely required to complete written and oral assignments.

The sixth point is that information technology should be used creative to deliver course content. The seventh point is that the final semester's experience should culminate in a capstone project. In such a course the students would have the double advantage of independent inquiry and communicating results to others. The eighth point is that graduate students should be trained to become better teachers so that they may in turn provide good quality education to undergraduates.

The ninth point is that faculty reward systems need to be changed to reward good teachers with permanent increases in their pay. Finally, the tenth point suggests that campus wide activities be provided so that students develop a sense of community. These include such activities as football games that students can identify with. When the student feels connected, their emotional needs are met and consequently they become better learners.

DISCUSSION

The Boyer commission report has far reaching implications for the pedagogy of experiential learning. The report gives the pedagogy of experiential learning a big "thumbs up" by proposing that undergraduate education at research universities be based on research based learning. The main idea is that students would be involved as junior partners in research projects and would participate in framing study questions, collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting results in oral and written form to others. In other words, the main source of learning would be experiential rather than passive learning of information delivered to students in the form of lectures. Another major recommendation of the commission is to provide undergraduate students with an integrating experience in the form of a capstone project. In general, students would be expected to apply all their skills to a practical problem.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusion of the Boyer commission was that undergraduate students were frequently "shortchanged" in terms of education. The commission made a ten point recommendation based on the pedagogy of experiential learning for improving the state of undergraduate education at these universities.

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