The “Open Mind” Standard

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This has been a personal mantra that, when applied, has often rescued me from the ideologically-driven decisions of my younger years. In retrospect, I recall with some embarrassment the times when my dedication to being right superseded my ability to hear a perspective that differed from my own. It’s as though I couldn’t wait until others ceased speaking so that I could explain to them why they were wrong.

This is my personal point-of-entry into a larger national conversation about the future of higher education in America. You see, the mental habits of mind that call for one to withhold judgment until one understands a new or differing perspective are the habits targeted by this powerful American innovation called general education.

GE (as we simplify it in higher education parlance) was a break from our European ancestors who moved students more quickly into their chosen careers through industry-specific courses and work-based apprenticeships. The thought leaders of the American higher education experiment wanted to give more defined attention to the broad and enduring mental capacities that would serve someone beyond their first job and embrace their responsibilities as an informed citizen. GE has thus become an essential part of America’s undergraduate degrees.

In the work of accreditation, we are called upon to make a distinction between that which imparts job-related skills and that which defines an academic degree. That distinction largely pivots on the GE courses required for the degree. The sentiments around describing and defending those courses have become more urgent in recent years as there is a discernable shift in values toward job readiness over cognitive acuity. This shift is likely linked to the increasing debt load of today’s graduates – to the need for generating an immediate income to make one’s loan obligations. While this is certainly understandable, it is not without a price.

Today’s graduates are being thrust into a world of heated conceptual battles. With enormous consequences at stake, young minds search for a grounding in what is relevant, what is compassionate, what is moral, and what stands on solid evidence. At no time in recent memory has the American experiment in democracy been more dependent on what our students do through their conversations, at the ballot box, by their advocacy and activism, and with the causes they support. Concurrently, never has there been the plethora of opinions, arguments, trolling, and just plain noise from a cloud of sources, pitching for each one’s attention and loyalties.

In the midst of it all, proudly and quietly, we find ACCJC Standard of Accreditation II.A.11, which reads in part:

The institution includes in all its programs student learning outcomes, appropriate to the program level, in . . . analytic inquiry skills, ethical reasoning, the ability to engage diverse perspectives . . .
To be sure, this Standard envisions no incidental undertaking. Faculty embark daily on the task of reshaping deeply-held mental patterns. They face in their classrooms the very kinds of resistance, of pre-judgment, that forestall desperately needed understanding. They hear the memes picked up that morning from Facebook and Instagram, then search for ways to help their students look behind the clever saying to the underlying values and reasoning.

The professional literature speaks of “transformational education,” which means that, far more than the acquisition of knowledge, the student becomes a different person. Its goal is for students to exhibit a new mental model and new ways of thinking about the most pressing issues of our time. One of its most fruitful manifestations is when a student pauses, withholding judgement long enough to understand. And, quite often, no subsequent judgement is warranted.