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The College as a Philanthropy. Yes, a Philanthropy.

By Dick Merriman

After spending most of my adult life in private higher education, I've concluded that most of our students are unprepared for college. They may be academically ready and emotionally mature, but they don't understand what a college is or what its motives and mission are. Because they don't understand those things, they are often unprepared to meet our expectations. Worse, they are unprepared to receive the gifts we are waiting, and hoping, to give them.

The way students don't understand college was crystallized for me several years ago in a meeting with a student. She had come to see me to voice a complaint, which went roughly like this: "I've learned that a teammate on my sports team is receiving more institutional financial aid than I am, even though she isn't as good a player as I am, and she's not making as important a contribution to the team as I am. In the interest of fairness, I would like you to increase my aid."

This student's evident emotional turmoil made it clear that something bigger than wanting "more" was happening. It eventually came out, through tears, that her family was struggling financially, and she felt she needed to lighten her parents' financial burden. That was easy to address once the true problem was made clear.

The question the meeting raised, and the question I couldn't stop puzzling over afterward, was why it hadn't occurred to this student to come to me and say, "I have a problem, and I need the college to help me." Clearly it never crossed her mind that her relationship with the college would permit such a request for help.

Many subsequent events and conversations have confirmed that our students, and their families, and many others, don't understand what a college is. In an era of increasing competition from for-profit colleges, and facing heightened regulatory scrutiny, institutions with selfless motives and service missions would be wise to find their voices and make their intentions clear.

I've tried to find, and raise, my college's voice, and to address, in various settings, this issue of what a college is. The best opportunity I've found—because freshmen will still listen to the president at this

point—is when I welcome our new class to the campus. Here is what I say, with variations, each fall:

We have a strong tendency in our society today to look at things from the perspective of the consumer. We want to be smart shoppers. We want to make a good buy. We love a bargain. We don't want to get a bad deal.

People often speak of "shopping for a college." Maybe you and your parents used that phrase in the past year as you visited colleges. It would follow from that perspective, wouldn't it, that you, the customer, are here to purchase your higher education?

Another way the consumer perspective shapes thinking about college relates to scholarships and financial aid. Many of you have received academic scholarships, which reflect your academic promise as revealed by your high-school grades or your ACT or SAT scores. And many of you have received scholarships related to your planned participation in the performing arts, service learning, and athletics. The consumer perspective would prompt you to think that the college is "paying" you to come here. That would make you a kind of commodity, a bundle of talents and experiences that the college has decided to purchase.

I want to be clear with you: You are not a customer here. You are something much better than that. You are not a commodity here. You are something way better than that. The reason you are not merely a customer or a commodity is that this college is not a business.

This college is a philanthropy. If you pay attention to the origins of words and you look at the pieces of that word, "phil" and "anthropy," you know that "phil" means love or esteem or high regard. And "anthropy" means humanity or humankind. The college is a philanthropy, an expression of love and esteem for humankind.

This college exists as a philanthropy because thousands of people, many of whom you and I will never know, have built it over the past 125 years. They built it for your benefit, knowing they would never meet you. The college's facilities, our endowment for scholarships, our mission—all of these have been built, and protected and sustained, for your benefit. They were built so you can gain a college education, find and pursue your passion, and commit yourselves to living a valuable life. In short, this college exists so you can become a better person and, in turn, help make the world a better place.

None of you, not even that very rare student who receives no

financial aid from the college, will come close to paying what it is going to cost the college to educate you. You know what? That's OK. That's not a problem. In fact, that is the whole idea. Because you are not a customer, and the college is not a business. This college is a philanthropy, and we have a marvelous gift to give you—a far better education than you can afford, and the opportunity to work with people who truly care about you—and we are able to give this gift to you because of the financial support of thousands of alumni and friends and because the college's people have committed themselves to you.

If you have the money to purchase it, you can go into any McDonald's in the country and they will sell you a Big Mac. But you can't buy a Southwestern College education that way. How much money you have is not the point. If we were to run this college like a business, if profit were our motive, we would probably just focus on educating students who have a lot of money. And a lot of you wouldn't be here today.

But making a profit isn't our mission. Helping you is our mission.

What I'm trying to say is that you may believe you are here because you chose this college. And it is true, of course, that you have something to say about which college you attend. But it is more relevant, and truer, to say that you are here because we chose you. You certainly wouldn't be here otherwise.

So much for being a customer.

Now let me say a few words on the subject of students as commodities. I know that there are lots of messages in our consumer culture that encouraged you, as you advanced through high school, to think of yourself as a bundle of talents and experiences that could be "marketed" to colleges. Right? You were encouraged to participate in a wide range of activities to show that you were well rounded. And you were encouraged to excel at something specific—singing, basketball, writing for the school paper, debate—to show that you were talented. All of this would make you marketable. Right? And you would attract scholarships and financial aid. In short, you were supposed to see yourself as a commodity that colleges would compete over.

But the college is a philanthropy, not a business. And we are here to help you, not to buy you, and certainly not to pay you. The reason to sing in the choir is because you have a passion to sing. The reason to play football is that you love football.

I know—because I ask this question of freshmen every year—that

you believe you will lose your tennis scholarship if you quit the tennis team. You think your choir scholarship will vanish if you decide not to sing in the choir anymore. But I've got news for you: You won't lose that scholarship. Your financial-aid package won't be reduced just because your interests or priorities change. Why not? Well, first, because you are supposed to change. That's why you came here. It doesn't make a lot of sense to punish you for it. Second, because we aren't using financial aid to pay you to come here. We are using financial aid to help you afford a college education. The college is a philanthropy.

Now, the fact that the college is a philanthropy doesn't mean that we're all soft and squishy and have no expectations of you. Quite the opposite. We expect a lot of you. We expect you to spend your time here exploring and developing your talents and abilities. There is something you are uniquely well suited to do with your life, something for which you have a passion, something valuable for others. Spend your time here looking for that. We expect you to take yourself seriously, and to take this opportunity seriously.

Our admissions process doesn't make many mistakes in evaluating the academic abilities of students. The students we choose to be here are able to do the academic work that is required to stay here. You can do it. We chose you on that basis.

Because the college is a philanthropy, because we are committed to your growth and development, because we love you, you are permitted to make mistakes here, you are permitted to be confused here, and you are permitted to change your mind and change your plans here. What you are not permitted to do here is waste our time. Because we have made an investment in you. Because we chose you to receive a fabulous gift. All we ask of you is that you honestly make your best effort to capitalize on this opportunity.

Of course, the college also has responsibilities and obligations. They stem from our philanthropic mission. We owe you our very best efforts, in instruction, in our campus-life programs, in the residence halls, in everything we do.

Please make the most of your time here. Let's grow together.

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