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Interview with Paul Zingg

Mary Kay Harrington

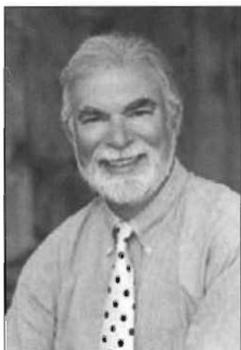
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Cal Poly Provost Paul Zingg

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL ZINGG

Cal Poly SLO Provost

Mary Kay Harrington

MKH: Some think that we're inclined to follow the MBA model of higher education, where students are our clients, and we must serve what they want not necessarily what they need. What are the pros and cons of that model?

PZ: That model is very limited, but it does make sense to be current, to understand who our students are, and how their attitudes and values change. Years ago, students were pursuing education much more to develop a philosophy of life, to have a journey of self-discovery. Now, a college degree means to have an edge on a job.

Developing a philosophy of life and having an edge on the job market aren't necessarily in opposition. It's possible for students to accept turns in the path, for some to become more interested in vocationalism. After all, a vocation is more than a skill. Mark Twain, in *Life on the Mississippi*, talks about the importance of anticipation and adaptation¹—which is what a good education achieves.

The dangers of the business model are many though. It's true that we ought to be able to explain the worth of the curriculum, why it contains what it does. Students do need to understand the difference between immediate needs and the long-term view—and that's partly the faculty's job. To be crassly practical is unhealthy for a number of reasons, but one good one is that the most narrowly educated are often the first to be unemployed. Mario Salvio said that there's a difference between training and education way back in the 60's—and others said that before him.

MKH: There's another notion that is prevalent, that the humanities are mere "service" areas, that the real work of the university is to "train" students for their professions.

PZ: This is a dangerous idea, and the faculty who promote the notion that the humanities are less important than "professional" training do their students a huge disservice. They're just wrong. The sad thing is that students pick up on the tension between those who believe in training only and those who believe in educating.

There was a Purdue alumni study a few years ago that gives us some valuable information. They had three control groups—those who had been out of school for five years or less, those between five and ten years, and those beyond ten years. The control group

was asked what they wished that they had taken more of in college during their undergraduate careers. Those who had been out five years or less wished that they had taken an extra course or two in their employment field. Those who had been out of school 5-10 years focused more on management and issues of human intercourse; they wished for more courses in organizational psychology, or group dynamics, or interpersonal relationships. The last group, those out of school for quite a while, wished they had taken more art, more literature, more music.

MKH: Cal Poly has about 20 “institutes” and “centers” on its campus; the most recent is a specialty crop institute. Isn’t there some danger of undue influence over education by the corporate sponsors of these activities?

PZ: Of course there are great temptations, but at Cal Poly, we have a strong conflict of interest committee, and we have policies and procedures that are clear and in place. These institutes and their sponsored research just aren’t a major part of what we do.

MKH: In the book “The Knowledge Factory,” Stanley Aronowitz says that a BA signifies that a person can tolerate boredom and knows how to follow the rules.

PZ: Yes, there’s probably some truth in that statement.

MKH: In 1963, Clark Kerr wrote a book called “The Uses of the University.” He said, and I quote, “University’s invisible product, knowledge, may be the single most powerful element in our culture, affecting the rise and fall of professions and even of social classes, of regions and even of nations.”²² He believed that we were a knowledge university.

PZ: There’s been quite a backlash to Kerr’s notions of the complex university, with its multiple centers of influence and multiple conflicts of interest. He articulated the idea that the university—the multiversity—had a broad mission, that service, research, and scholarship were all connected, though often conflicting.

The tendency now is to articulate the common ground and connected purposes of the university. Unity is the aim while acknowledging diverse perspectives and multiple visions. We need to respect the different roles of each discipline. In many ways Cal Poly is “siloeed”—there’s not enough mutual respect among disciplines. The Greek definition of polytechnic was “many ways of knowing.” That “knowing” is not merely the scientific or the technical or the artistic—they’re merely some of the ways to know. To promote mutual respect among disciplines is a great challenge at Cal Poly and the csu.

MKH: Mario Savio said in a speech at Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement in 1964, “You’ve got to be a part; part of a machine. Now, every now and then, the machine doesn’t work. One of the parts breaks down. And in the case of a normal regular machine you throw that part out; throw it out and you replace it. Well, this

machine, this factory here, this multiversity, its parts are human beings. And sometimes they go out of commission, they don't really break down, but they really gum up the whole works."³ *How far off base was he?*

PZ: Savio's experience was limited to Berkeley, but he understood what finally makes us human, and it wasn't a narrow curricular agenda. He had in mind the small liberal arts campus. Berkeley was just too big—he misunderstood the Berkeley mission where community came in small pockets—for example, freshmen honors seminars, theme residences, and other attempts to shrink the psychological size of the university.

Savio knew how to manipulate language and exaggerate it to make a point. But what he said certainly resonated, and folks began asking why a university couldn't be different. He reminded everyone that a university was a place for people and ideas, a place with its traditions defined, and an identity that is both real and symbolic. It's also a place where interaction and connection takes place, so that environment must be safe for both people and ideas. I agree that a university should be a place where mutual exploration, between faculty and students, takes place. The faculty is essential in this interchange, and there are two important hallmarks of a good teacher: that he or she has a command of the discipline, and that he or she teaches by force of personal example and good values.

MKH: Could it be said that our public institutions focus on manufacturing workers to fit into the corporate culture? That we don't want them to question very much, just to do the job necessary to make money for the employer?

PZ: The Land Grant Act of 1862 largely defined the role of public higher education. This definition should still be the focus of what public higher education should achieve. First came service to the community and to the state, and therefore the initial focus was on agriculture and engineering. The third goal was exactly what 19th century America needed: the healthy marriage of the intellectual and the utilitarian. Even earlier, Ben Franklin talked about the importance of knowledge that was both useful and "ornamental," that a balance must be struck.

At 17th century Harvard, a classical education was eminently professional, and from the first day of a student's enrollment, he was taught how to think, to form connections, to communicate, to reason, to have values, ethics, and perspective. One couldn't dismiss as ornamental what was essentially fundamental. Everything is finally built on knowledge of the fundamental, and dismissing history, literature, philosophy, etc. as impractical, as mere icing on the cake, is to misunderstand what's truly fundamental. 

Notes

1. Twain, Mark, *Life on the Mississippi*, Reissue ed. (New York: Bantam Classics, 1997).
2. Kerr, Clark, in Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 30.
3. Savio, Mario, in Aronowitz, 33.