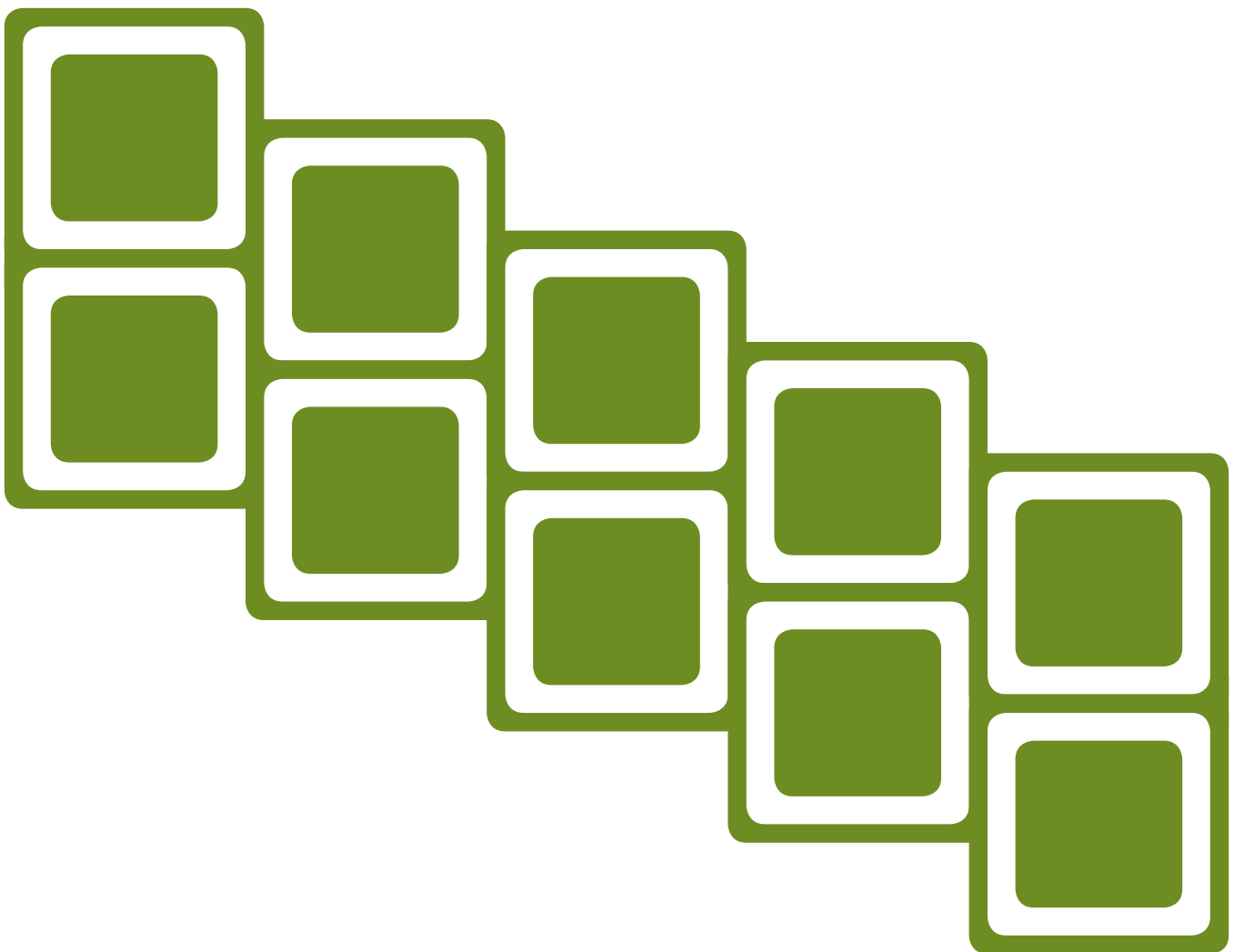


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Forum



No Country for Old Men

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This article is a version of a talk given at the 2011 North American Association of Summer Sessions conference in Chicago. For decency's sake, my speaking notes were stripped of ribald anecdote and trivia. For brevity's sake, I have excluded my tribute to NAASS and my colleagues. As a writer of fiction and essays, I am used to preparing written work for oral presentation, but not at all used to the reverse. The speaker is always alert to his or her listeners: moments of laughter, disengagement, unusual interest, or increased incidence of folk excusing themselves to use the bathroom may lead the speaker to manipulate the subject to suit the audience. The writer makes a purpose clear and sticks to it. I hope this article offers a coherent view of how I believe NAASS and summer sessions, indispensable as they have been to each other, will be even more so as summer managers respond to a changing university environment and, consequently, mission. Here's what would be on my mind were I facing the next 10 years in harness.

When I ran a summer session as a subunit of a continuing education division, I was constantly admonished by my director to "know my place." It was almost a subversive activity to initiate or innovate in directions where we saw need and opportunity. (Time and again NAASS came to my rescue or provided solace.) Now, in the midst of recession, with business-as-usual in doubt and the near certainty that only the deluded and complacent believe that things will go back comfortably to what they were, I think the need for leadership in and by summer sessions, and therefore by NAASS, has never been clearer and the opportunity never greater.

The American university system has been, to quote Bill Keller (2011) in a highly ambivalent article on higher education in *The New York Times*, "a wonder of the world."¹ But I have a strong impression from the bad press our universities have been getting lately that the glow is fading. Fully aware of the danger of generalizations, I think we might well pay attention to these few:

- A degree is unconscionably expensive.
- Grads emerge without learning much and unprepared for citizenship and work.
- Creativity, independent attitudes, and risk taking are not encouraged.
- Universities, preoccupied with something called "branding," are into aggressive touting but less into exploring the fitness of their educational mission.
- Historical collegiality that used, at least in theory, to be the example for civility and equity among professionals is rapidly being replaced by a corporate-type hierarchy replete with self-important suits who would be as much at home in a meatpacking plant as in an intellectual milieu.

- Grant and dollar acquisition and research, both pure and applied, have become the primary concern of higher academe, instead of teaching.
- Salary scales, for administration as well as faculty, have gotten so far out of whack that institutions are unusually vulnerable to budget shortages that are, after all, going to be the norm. The responses to budgetary constraints tend to penalize students and teaching faculty through ever-larger classes, reduced selection, cancellations, delay of graduation, diminished quality, and adjusted “teaching loads” for researchers—*load* being the term used for the *burden of teaching*—which, for heaven’s sake, is what faculty were once primarily hired to do.
- But the glow of summer as a “value term” hasn’t faded, perhaps because, more than anything, summer session remains focused on *teaching*: its faculty come to it as teachers. Summer school work echoes back to, and is enriched by, academic research, but there is no battle about priorities. Our perennial campaigns for recognition and funding and about whether summer teaching counts for promotion and tenure decisions remain as robust as ever, but they don’t matter much. What matters is that summer session at best is a model for (1) efficiency—not the university’s strong point—because we have to be efficient, and (2) innovation—since the ground is so much more fertile in summer because time, place, and incentive encourage it—in the service of teaching.

So what? Summer session isn’t the university, is it? Doesn’t set the tone? Summer is merely the little sib of spring and fall, quality and content determined by them and trickling down, if they will, to us? After all, when faculty conveniently think of us as squalid entrepreneurs who are happy only when enrollments are large, and who ruthlessly and whimsically liquidate courses when they aren’t, thus proving we are the enemies of learning—of which they alone are the champions; and when, on the other hand, senior administration thinks we are not half squalidly entrepreneurial enough and asks only “How much?” and/or “How many?” and cares only that we deliver; then we can be excused for thinking of ourselves first as little more than peddlers, generators of student credit hours and dollars, and only secondly as educators. All too often, we accept our role as middlemen and confirm the faculty’s and administration’s convenient view of us, selling ourselves short and failing to realize the unique educational potential of summer session.

Well, forget the timid apologia that summer instruction aspires to the rigor and quality of spring and fall, whose minimalist indices—number of hours of student/instructor interface, grade distribution, assignments given—say no more about what is going on of intellectual value during the regular term than they do in summer. I spent a good deal of my time in academe arguing that short and intensive courses on select subjects, typical of the ones we conduct in summer, could be unusually effective and certainly intellectually and educationally viable. University faculty committees sniffily permitted me to offer them once they were convinced on paper that they complied minimally with the canons. Frankly, I wasn’t just arguing to offer them in summer. I was offering an antidote to the idea operative in spring and fall that all knowledge is divided, like Caesar’s Gaul, into three credit parts, and that students can sign up at the same time for a stack of six frequently random courses and still keep the stuff straight in their head. At the very least, the intensity of focus of summer might be instructive for the architecture, pace, and presentation of content in the regular terms.

Summer session may be the last true meeting place of disciplines on the campus. The College of Education used to be such a meeting place, but it forgot, absorbing, emulsifying, and dumbing down hard disciplines as education departments bristled not with mathematicians and scientists and writers but with science and math “educationists” and “reading specialists.” The English Department used to be such a meeting place but consigned its most valuable courses on critical reading and writing to the lowest-paid lecturers and adjunct instructors so that “real” faculty could get on with their largely archival research. So there’s summer session. Us! Not an academic “field,” not a discipline. But a collection of uniquely skilled, usually well-rounded, academically prepared university citizens who can capably match educational needs and the university’s assets, including its intellectual and pedagogical resources; who are familiar with the university’s academic programs and culture as well as its practical priorities of lessening time to degree, sustaining university services, supplementing faculty income, and, yes, generating revenue; and who can integrate all these into an educational enterprise in keeping with the highest academic standards and expectations of the institution. Far from a throwaway semester, not to be taken too seriously in the imposing shadow of fall and spring, summer session is the best practical instrument for momentum to degree, for on-time graduation, for staying in school and in the same school, for student support and head start, for professional development and enrichment, not only for adult students and practitioners whose optimum time for formal learning is summer but for faculty who participate in designing, teaching, and collaborating on summer courses; and for the enriching of the intellectual mix when visiting faculty and part-timers who are professionals, practitioners, and pursuers of the PhD join the “regular” faculty to teach as temporary colleagues. Summer session does all this while facilitating effective teaching and new course development by enterprising faculty, supporting innovation in the design of cross-disciplinary courses, implementing research goals that involve teaching special populations that we have the expertise to recruit, encouraging professor/practitioner interaction through courses for agency professionals and professional degree-seeking students, and supporting experiments with space, distance, scheduling, frequency, and intensity. And, in all these, being an actively engaged partner providing models, examples, sources, experienced consultation, and leadership. Okay, much of what we do in summer session is routine—the solicitation, coordinating, and promotion of a collection of the university’s courses in keeping with expectations of demand, affordability, and income. Well, thank God it is, for then we are able to afford time and energy and creativity to explore the possibilities of summer for innovation and problem solving with bright faculties who are aware of these probabilities, too, thus answering the eternal question: “What do you do the rest of the year?”

Regarding those “bright faculties”: they are the world to us. We should work with, listen to, and train our faculty more and better. Over the years, I’ve poked fun at my colleagues’ peccadilloes, their frequent impracticalities, their frequent failure to understand issues outside their own teaching desiderata, their short memory, their occasionally lunatic eccentricities, their propensity for becoming more indignant the more mistaken they are; their resistance to teaching in the classroom assigned to them because of the blind conviction that the grass is always greener in someone else’s space; their obliviousness to information—about their course, their schedule, their pay, their book or printing orders, etc. —however punctually it is sent to them, as they prefer the excitement of last-minute panic to stodgy, old-fashioned planning; their blank innocence in the face of muddles and misunderstandings of which they are themselves so often the cause. And yet they are the university’s real treasure. If we are dedicated to anything, it must be to assuring that they are at the heart of choices made for summer; that they are paid fairly for their courses (fairly

by your judgment, not theirs; by theirs, they are never fairly paid) —and not by student head count (which makes hustlers of them and cattle of students); that they are privy to promotional decisions; and that genuine and reasonable course constraints are honored.

But even old men have visions and dream dreams. Shortly before retiring, I took a role in a university play, as I have many times before. The play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was very unconventionally staged, outdoors, the action in several places, and it was often difficult to know who were audience members and who were players. Over many years doing plays, I got used to actors being on a discernible stage in front of an audience in the auditorium. Oh, we mixed them up from time to time to appear avant-garde, but the roles were pretty traditional. Behind and at the sides of the stage tended to be the crew, and somewhere above were the swashbuckling lighting folk. But in this play, not only did the actors move from venue to venue, but so did the audience. And there was a choice of action to watch—some live, some video, not to mention what was going on around us on campus. For it was never entirely clear who the audience was. People would wander in—curious to see what was going on—who might have been on the way to class or just passing through. People would leave to do something else as the mood took them. Architecture students in the adjacent quad played volleyball, and students and faculty meandered back and forth to meetings or the cafeteria or the library, perhaps peripherally interested in our show for a moment, perhaps not, their attention often disrupted by cell phones. During one show, an ambulance crew responded to an emergency call in a nearby building. During another, a flight of noisy geese strafed our play's young lovers as they headed for the trees. I plodded glumly and conventionally through my part, not at all comfortable with such anarchic innovation. But I have since become convinced that this is exactly the challenge of change in academe: it's no longer within the lines, the roles shift and change, improvisation is in, along with risk and the unexpected. And the audience is pretty well anybody who happens to be in the vicinity. I'd like to think this metaphor, this epiphany, is sound. I am curious as to whether I would embrace it were I still working. But as long as I know that those astonishingly virtuoso and imaginative student players and their teachers, with all their enviable panache, athleticism, and talent, have thoroughly made sense of Shakespeare's text, then I must leave it all to smarter folk more at ease with what I have described.

Writing this, my mind wandered, as the minds of old folk are wont to do, back to the November 2011 conference in Chicago. A high point for me was the splendid presentation called "Chicago: Space and Place, Values and Identity." The speaker, Bill Savage of Northwestern, an exemplary teacher—and serial summer school teacher—had condensed the summer session course he has taught, no doubt to tides of students, for two decades, into a skillful and loving guide to the city: its history, boundaries, people, and poets. Listening to him on Chicago, I recalled the Victorian John Newman in *What Is a University?* on metropolises that, for their libraries, museums, galleries, academies, and learned and scientific societies, are "in fact and in operation" tantamount to universities. To Paris and London, he would assuredly add Chicago now.² I don't know whether Cardinal Newman ever taught summer school, but I am reminded that exploring great cities, with the broadening and civilizing effects of doing so, is a quintessential summer option—a thought prompted in this case by a summer school teacher at a summer school conference. From an "afterthought semester" that gave students a chance to take dreaded courses heretofore avoided, or to play catch-up, or to provide a little extra loot for administrations and pin money for faculty, summer session has become an opportunity to innovate in design and teaching of courses. Taking advantage are students in the general humanities as well as those

seeking professional retraining, personal enrichment, and skill acquisition and enhancement for job eligibility. Summer session has become ideal for incorporating students into research and internships, better preparing the college bound, and “exploiting” creatively the twin phenomena of student persistence, which necessitates continuation through summer, and mobility, which allows students to take advantage of diverse institutions in fulfilling their educational needs. All this requires a coherent and collaborative approach to curriculum planning rather than a grab-bag, offer-only-what-packs-’em-in approach; a curriculum that might focus not only on the institution’s staple programs but also on issues that engage faculty, student, and community interest, such as sustainability, social justice, and global challenges; a program that includes educational technologies whose primary purpose is to enhance content rather than convenience. We may only just be beginning to see the effects of the recession. Even as we begin to see the toll it takes on the primacy of teaching, we should embrace the promise it holds for the summer enterprise.

Endnotes

1. Keller’s article, “The University of Wherever,” could be cited to support the efficacy of online learning and just as easily cited as a defense of traditional approaches. My quotation is part of his final statement in the article: “Who could be against an experiment that promises the treasure of education to a vast, underserved world? But we should be careful, in our idealism, not to diminish something that is already a wonder of the world.”
2. Newman suggests that cities are but “virtual universities,” perhaps the first time this phrase was used, although not in the modern sense. What is acquired in cities, says Newman, wonderful as it is, is “a random succession, one after another, with a melancholy waste of thought.” This well summarizes criticism of much modern undergraduate education. A curmudgeon might add that the “virtual university,” when it focuses on convenience rather than content, is eligible for the same criticism.

References

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Biography

Ken Burrows was director of summer programs at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for more than two decades and a long-time member of the North American Association of Summer Sessions and the North Carolina Association of Summer Sessions. He is now retired. He lives with his wife, Robin, in Charlotte. Their three talented children, Chris, Emily, and Michael, also live in North Carolina.