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Maybe Colleges Should Take a Lesson from Zoos

By Michael Preston
UCF Forum columnist
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What would it take to create a more learning-efficient campus? What elements must we have, what culture must we extend to promote a more responsive campus to bolster student success?

The answer may be in the seemingly unrelated work of Australian architect and zoo director David Hancocks. In his 2002 book, *A Different Nature*, Hancocks explored the paradox of the modern zoo.

We traditionally have taken animals that were meant to live and thrive in the wild and placed them on display at zoos for the purpose of study and our own entertainment. We take these animals that are meant to roam free in wide geographical expanses and house them in a controlled environment. Of course, this can go tragically wrong as we were made aware in 2016 when a male gorilla was killed at a Cincinnati zoo to rescue a 3-year-old boy who fell into the gorilla's enclosure.

While we all acknowledge that universities are not zoos, there is kind of a parallel. Universities are an ecosystem in which our students, faculty and staff must interact, and if we do not provide the right environment for learning then our students can suffer the consequences.

Hancocks recalls the time he and his fellow zoo professionals in the 1970s took an enormous chance and redesigned the Seattle Zoo in an effort to create a more natural and accessible zoo. Unlike the cold and sterile zoo enclosures of the past, Hancocks and his team developed an enclosure for the gorilla exhibit that looked familiar to their native Central African mountains.

This was controversial because there was a general understanding among zoo advocates that giving these animals a more natural setting would bring out their violent nature. As these animals would be exposed to a more natural setting they would desire to be free and turn on their handlers and try to escape.

As the great experiment unfolded, the opposite happened. When exposed to a more ethical setting, the gorillas thrived. They became more active and formed tighter family groups. Incidents of gorilla violence against their human keepers plummeted. The result was Hancock's more ethical zoo that is emulated all over the world today.

Universities are not zoos, at least not in the traditional sense – even if going to any student union on a given day the term “zoo” may seem like an apt description to some.

Higher education has been working under the assumption that the traditional model of college access and matriculation is the best way to engage and encourage student success. However, we are learning more and more that a traditional model of acceptance, classes and graduation does not work for many students.

While the value of a college education is evident there is still an ongoing debate on college for whom? On average, a college graduate will earn \$800,000 more in their lifetime than those holding just a high school diploma. More importantly since the great recession of 2009, virtually every job created in the aftermath has been aimed at those with a college degree.

But college, in and of itself, is not a panacea. The cost of college is still a major issue for many families and that seems to be rising. More and more students around the country are mortgaging their future income through student loans to pay for college. For the class of 2016 the national average college debt was \$37,000. (At UCF, 44 percent of students graduate with no debt. Of those who do incur debt – including those who transferred to UCF carrying some student loans – the average is \$22,000.)

These factors, combined with a perception to some that college is not creating employable graduates, have led some to question the value of a college education.

But what are the answers and what are we supposed to do about it?

The answer may be in changing the environment.

The general model for higher education has been that students arrive to college and follow one single track in order to achieve their college dreams. But this model seems to be both outdated and inaccurate. It is not unusual for today’s college students to attend two or three colleges before graduating.

For the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities (the University of Central Florida, University of South Florida in Tampa, and Florida International University in Miami), more than 55 percent of the students transfer in from a two-year college, where most of them have already achieved an associate degree. With that in mind, the consortium is partnering with the Helios Education Foundation to investigate how to create a more accessible campus by working together to share ideas, design solutions and ensure success.

An 18-month investigation is focusing on developing a strategic plan that is supportive of a networked approach to higher education that will challenge higher-education professionals and off-campus stakeholders to remember our ethical principles of “students first.”

Who knows what that will take but the goal is to provide access to higher education for more students who will incur less debt and graduate on time with a number of viable career options.

A byproduct of this planning period could be a model for all universities to work together and become more in sync with each other.

No, universities are not zoos, but maybe educational institutions can learn by example and create the right environment for learning so students can thrive in their updated world.

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