

Seasons

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, APR 10 2014

The academic year, at least in an American school like ours at CEFAM, runs according to the pattern of the seasons. Each semester has its own rhythm and each part of the year has its own pace. There is the frenzy that accompanies the new students arriving in the Fall, the intensity of the short, inter-semester Winter session, the re-birth that comes with the Spring and then the more relaxed tempo of the Summer. Finally, there is a short period – maybe only a couple of weeks – following the Summer semester where professors get a chance to do something other than teach. This post-Summer, pre-Fall period seems long, hot days matched with the myriad of tasks that never seem to get done during the rest of the year, whether it be filing and tidying offices or getting through the stack of journals that has been jealously eyeing you since they started piling up mid-Spring.

This pace and these seasons, though existent, are under pressure today from moves in the academy towards greater rationalisation and maximization of resources. Why, ask administrators and school directors, do buildings stand largely empty for a quarter of the year? Why do we continue with an agrarian academic calendar in a modern, technological, industrial society? How can we make more money from the same physical and intellectual resources that are so productive in the Fall and Spring but seemingly so unproductive in the Summer?

In one sense these are exactly the right questions to be asking. It *is* wasteful and a significant under-use of resources when buildings stand empty for three or four months of the year. And, indeed, if universities can increase revenues in the summer from non-tuition sources then opportunities for tuition reductions, scholarships, or salary increases emerge for the full-time students and professors at other times. Maximising the return on resources into which schools and universities have invested many millions of euros, pounds and dollars is sensible, accountable and responsible strategic management.

However fair these questions, though, there are often some unstated assumptions that arrive with them, and some follow-up questions that are less reasonable. Take, for example, the question of the agrarian calendar and the long, student-less Summers that professors enjoy: should they not be working more, adding another semester to the program and allowing students to graduate six months or a year earlier by studying year-round?

The answer is no. Like the fields that lie fallow for a season, professors need to take some time in the year to re-group, breathe, research, administer, and develop new concepts and classes without having to lecture, tutor, grade and work with students. It is nigh on impossible to do all of these things at once and the fact that professors spend three-quarters of their year teaching means that, for that final quarter, there needs to be time to rest and refuel before the next academic year.

Take also the question of making money consistently across the year from the intellectual resources on campus. If by 'intellectual resources' the university means the library collection and the university art collection then, yes, there is perhaps scope to use these physical objects throughout the year to produce greater revenue streams. Yet the human intellectual resources, what we can call the professors and the teachers on campus, need to be seen as something other than revenue streams to be exploited consistently across the year.

So how to bring these two sides of a debate together? How should universities maximise the use of their resources, create new revenue streams and still manage their researchers and teachers so that they can contribute world's best

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practice teaching, learning and research? My suggestion is to marry the physical resources of the university – the buildings, the grounds, the physical collections, the spaces – with outsiders who can take advantage of these elements to create value for the university. Lease a building to a management consultant for a month, bring executive and corporate education into the university classrooms in the summer, host retreats for companies or language courses for holidaying students. As a professor I like a busy, bustling campus and I would appreciate the increased revenues that such summer programs would bring to the university. I still need my post-Summer season of renewal, but I can renew while others from outside experience their own season of growth.

About the author:

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