Northern Kentucky more inspirational than the Ivy Leaguers

5 September 2013

Felipe Fernández-Armesto on two undergraduates’ stairways to heaven (via Cincinnati)

Eat your heart out, Harvard. You’re not as good as Northern Kentucky University.

It may seem like an embarrassing admission to make in a magazine that produces the world’s most influential international university rankings, but I mistrust academic league tables: I can never convince myself that there are suitable criteria for comparisons of value. I cannot bear to read the listings because rich, old and prestigious institutions exert routine, predictable preponderance. Of course, Harvard University is insuperable for wealth, recruiting power, research funding, social cachet, networking opportunities, quality of plant and for the size of the library. But if we shift focus and ask how much difference an undergraduate education at Harvard (or Yale or Princeton or Stanford or Oxford or Cambridge or any of their elite lookalikes) makes to most of their students’ lives, we have to acknowledge that it probably doesn’t amount to very much.

The young men and women who survive the grueling admissions procedures are all tediously encumbered with over-education when they arrive. To increase their self-confidence would be to encourage vicious vanity. To augment their intelligence would be to nurture a dangerous race of super-guardians. To boost their existing social advantages would be to perpetuate wicked inequalities. Luckily, the universities they attend do very little in any of these respects, adding sparkle to stars, perhaps, and momentum to meteors. To find places that make an alchemical difference – that ignite unsuspected genius, enchant Cinderellas into princesses and magic modest ducklings into very fine swans – you have to look at the truly heroic local and regional universities. These institutions have shoestring budgets and few or no historic advantages, but make up for their deficiencies by the commitment of the teachers, the ambition of the students and the zeal of the communities that surround them.

A few years ago in this column I mentioned Northern Kentucky as one of a number of like-minded places that I visited on a lecture tour of the US. I reported that the history department was outstanding and inspiring, although I have never heard of any international league table that reflects its merits. Two Northern Kentucky undergraduates have now stepped forward to demonstrate the excellence of the place. Andrew Boehringer and Shane Winslow are both joint majors in history and anthropology. They like exploring Cincinnati, Ohio, the city on the university’s doorstep. Their studies made them see it with an academic eye. One of Cincinnati’s charms is precipitate, higgledy-piggledy topography, connected by some 400 old public stairways, up and down which many generations of pedestrians have tramped in defiance of the cult of the automobile.

“As a history major,” Boehringer says, “you always have your eye out for a niche in history that has not been explored.” The two classmates realised that the stairs, more than the streets, were the skeleton of the historic city. They mapped them. They scoured the archives to find when and why and how people sited them, built them, reformed them and demolished them. They traced the way the stairways influenced the quality of life and the scope and nature of mobility in Cincinnati. They set them in the contexts of the culture and economy. They showed how religious communities grew around them and how the stairways shaped the remit of schools. They built up a picture of how the city grew in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Cincinnati Enquirer has quoted Winslow as saying: “Many of these staircases are rare, overlooked landscape markers of our community. People rarely consider [the] significance of these structures, but they help tell the story of how [Cincinnati] changed over time.”
The project has already had an impact on the city, which has commissioned the two students to make a photographic record of the stairways and to compare the existing structures with blueprints that have lain unexamined in the archives for up to two centuries.

Boehringer and Winslow have done it all on their own initiative. They were already working their way through college, but they provided all the funding they needed themselves by undertaking even more paid jobs, including a lot of menial work. When asked why they made the sacrifice, they appeal to love of the subject. They have taken their project into comparative terrain, looking at other cases around the world of cities set on hills with staircase frameworks. Now, as they approach graduation, they are turning their results into a book that will be a remarkable contribution to urban history, which they tentatively but cunningly entitle Descent: A History of the Cincinnati Steps. I wish I had known about it when I was at work on my chapter on the colonial history of Latin American cities in the Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History, because some of the places I wrote about have similar topographical challenges to those that shaped Cincinnati; yet I never even thought of focusing on stairways. I’m sure readers will know many other cases of similarly inspired, groundbreaking work by undergraduates. Some of those cases will have unfolded at Harvard and other privileged places. But I doubt whether any elite university exceeds or even equals Northern Kentucky’s history department in transformative power.

Article originally published as: Flights of inspiration (5 September 2013)

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http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/columnists/north-kentucky-more-inspirational-than-the-ivy-leaguers/2006971.article