

Thursday, July 11, 2002

Oxford University holds lessons for U.S. education

I've just returned from a conference in England, where I had my eyes jolted wide open by the differences between our two countries, and thoroughly separated, as the saying goes, "by our common language."

Some background first. Many years ago, I won a Marshall Scholarship to attend Oxford University. I wound up enrolling at one of Oxford's 31 colleges, University College. A couple of years ago, Univ. (as it's called) celebrated the 750th anniversary of the original funding grant it received in 1350 from the Bishop of Durham.

Hoping to survive for another 750 years, Univ. put together a gathering at which the Master, various faculty members, a few administrators and some alumni ("old members," in English parlance) to talk about how best to do this. It was during these conversations that I suddenly understood the enormous gulf that exists between basic assumptions about the role and power of government in each country.

The English way, going back to the days when King Henry VIII took over the church and created the first total state, is that government control is the normal state of things and that grants of authority to individuals or the locals are relatively unusual. The American assumption is quite the reverse. Article 10 of the Constitution, for example, says that those powers not explicitly given to the government are reserved for the people.

These differences were highlighted by our discussion about higher education, which in England is micro-controlled by the government in a way inconceivable to an American university. Here's how:

■ The Ministry of Education tells Oxford University and each of its colleges exactly how many students from Great Britain and European Union countries it may admit.

■ The government funds Oxford University and each college per student enrolled. Since 1989, this support has halved, dropping from 7700 Pounds to around 4800 Pounds today.

■ The government also caps the fees for tuition and board and room that the colleges are allowed to charge students, explicitly forbidding "top up fees."

■ The sum of per student government grants plus the fees colleges are allowed to charge students is substantially less what it costs the colleges. So the colleges lose money on every stu-

dent they enroll.

■ The government even tried (and eventually failed) to forbid individual colleges from giving scholarships to poor students. (This is odd, because one of the government's main policy objectives is to increase the number of poor kids enrolled in universities.)

The Americans at the meeting, of course, went apoplectic at all this. They talked knowledgeably about how an Oxford degree is a "world class brand" that entitled the colleges to charge a "market clearing price" that would meet the per student costs and leave something over for scholarships for poor students. They observed that the likely outcome of a policy that systematically impoverishes the colleges is the deterioration of the quality of an Oxford degree. And they suggested the colleges "go private" and tell the micromanaging government bureaucrats to bag it.

They had a point. Imagine Gov. Engler telling MSU President Peter McPherson just how many students he could enroll at Michigan State! Consider what the University of Michigan board of regents would do if they were told by the Department of Management and Budget just what fees they are allowed to charge! And think of the reaction of public universities in Michigan if the state legislature were to set strict admission quotas based on family income and whether students went to public high schools.

As I was flying back across the Atlantic, I started musing on how things came to this pass at one of the very greatest universities in the world. Years ago, Oxford University and its colleges were essentially private institutions, free to admit essentially any students they chose. After World War II, the British government recognized that a lot of smart kids couldn't afford to go to Oxford, so it started giving scholarships to all but the richest students.

And both British families and Oxford colleges, liking the government paying for kids to go to Oxford, acquiesced in what amounted to a governmental takeover of their higher education system. And in England, without a tradition of separation of powers and operating on the pervasive assumption of government micro-control, he who pays the piper calls the tune.

The lesson for us Americans? Simple. When the government offers to give you money for something, be wary. Just as it's the camel's nose under the tent that foreshadows the whole animal inside, the way government control often starts in what seems to be innocent acceptance of government money.

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Joni Hubred

Look at obesity as a health issue, not a character flaw

All my life, I've been what you might call...well, fat.

From a chubby-cheeked kid to a waddling mother-in-waiting to the slow, steady slide toward middle age, I've battled various bulges all my life. As time passes, I worry less about how I look and more about how I feel.

Still, I'd like that number on the scale to drop a few ticks. OK, maybe more than a few.

I'm not alone. In Michigan, almost 40 percent of us are overweight. Nationwide, obesity has become a health problem worthy of consideration by the U.S. Surgeon General's Office. Type II diabetes, normally seen in overweight adults, has started showing up in children at alarming rates.

Women seem to suffer the ignominy of overweight more than men, perhaps because we have dealt with it longer. At some point during the 1960s, thin got to be in when it came to fashion models, and we simply haven't recovered.

Look at movie and television screens. Rarely will you see a woman looking anything but waifish, and very few actresses who are overweight carry starring roles.

Calista Flockhart, Jennifer Aniston. The entire cast of "Sex in the City." Need I say more?

Still, 300,000 people die every year of causes directly related to obesity, and six of every 10 Americans are overweight, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Seems odd, doesn't it? Almost every magazine on the newsstands has an article or two about how to lose 10 pounds during the holidays or shed 20 pounds before swimsuit season. Countless infomercials hawk exercise programs, cookbooks that cut the fat, juice machines possessed of magical weight-loss powers.

We know being overweight is unhealthy. We can feel it in the way it's hard to catch a breath while climbing a long flight of stairs, in the way our energy levels drop to near-zero at the slightest provocation.

For some, overweight leads to high blood pressure, gallbladder disease, respiratory and heart problems.

Even for those who don't develop health problems, overweight is depressing, frustrating, maddening and embarrassing. Even the most well-adjusted person who is overweight can't help but be affected by the last acceptable bins in this country.

You can't use a racial epithet or make a sexually suggestive remark to a co-worker, but you can tease someone about being fat and nobody will blink an eye. Why? Because obesity is seen as a

character flaw, not a medical condition.

What would have happened if Southwest Airlines, which now charges some overweight customers for two tickets, had required physically disabled passengers to pay for the use and storage of their wheelchairs? The Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't allow that kind of discrimination, and rightly so.

But fat people take it on the chin every day, and in more ways than you might imagine.

CNNMoney.com reported recently that a Western Michigan University study found obese women earned 24 percent less in wages than workers of normal weight. A Harvard School of Public Health study found overweight children were more likely to be living in poverty and less educated as adults.

People who are obese (determined by body-mass index, a calculation that takes into account height and weight) spend more on health insurance and on medication than do heavy drinkers or smokers.

Fat discrimination in the workplace can take the form of relentless harassment by other employees or problems obtaining health insurance. It's tough to prove denial of a job based on size, but some court cases have hinged on that issue. Most often, people who are overweight are simply denied employment, without any explanation at all.

And we all know where the fat kids sit in the court of public opinion.

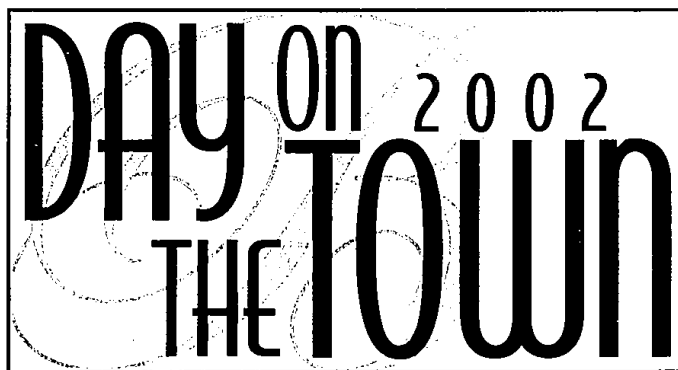
Considering all the magazine articles written about nutrition, the miles of videotape devoted to new exercise moves guaranteed to target problem areas, the myriad images of perfect bodies flying toward us every single day, why are we still fat?

The answer is simple. Overweight is not a character flaw. It's not a problem cured by self-discipline or sheer willpower. For some, it might not even be a problem at all. Only your doctor can tell you for sure.

Medical conditions aside, anyone who is healthy and happy, I think, ought to concentrate more on those things than a number on a scale that probably won't register the same number four hours later anyway.

Trust me. I've checked.

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