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Jim Saksa | Classes that matter - no, really

"Ideas in Action" seminars are actually helping students apply their knowledge to solve real-world problems

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You Sir, are an Idiot



Kids in college are incessantly subjected to the "you're the leaders of tomorrow" mantra. We need to soak up all the knowledge we can and learn from our parents' mistakes now, so we can finally be that generation that doesn't screw everything up. Yet some classes at Penn aim to do a little more than just teach students.

Students in "Ideas in Action" seminars speak truth to power; they investigate current issues and present their findings to the people that matter. In these classes, the synergy between ivory tower academia and real-world problem solving creates a richly rewarding intellectual experience.

Ben Franklin founded Penn to teach students business and public service; Wharton's got one half of that covered just fine, but the College should expand the "Ideas in Action" program dramatically, fulfilling Franklin's pragmatic vision of creating civic minded leaders out of beer-guzzling co-eds (or something like that).

These seminars incite a lavish level of student dedication that's rarely seen outside of Catholic seminaries. But when extraordinary enthusiasm meets political reality, the results can quickly cool the warm glow of accomplishment. After months of late-night group meetings, early morning speakers and countless hours refining that final report, the last thing students want to hear is some vague "attaboy!"

In both of the "Ideas in Action" classes I've taken, some students, myself included, felt that our work was ignored at the end. The real-world organizations we were working with seemed more respectfully bemused by our efforts than keenly interested in implementation.

In "The Presidency and Economic Policy", taught by Don Kettl, the class presented a new communications plan to the Concord Coalition, a non-partisan think tank, recommending in particular a major overhaul to their Web site. A year later, their Web site still looks like the Angelfire page I made in middle school. It looked like we were ignored.

"The policy process evolves in slow and unpredictable ways," Kettl told me. "The impact doesn't show up until maybe months or years after the work that's been done."

Until I started writing this column, I thought Concord wasn't interested in what the class had to say. Turns out, they were so interested that they hired one of the students, Stefan Byrd-Krueger, as their Youth Outreach Coordinator. "What we did in our class was exactly what they were looking for," Byrd-Krueger said. "I really saw a lot of value in that class, for obvious reasons. As an alumnus, I'd like to see more of it."

I took another "Ideas in Action" seminar, co-taught by John DiIulio and Joe Tierney. Throughout the year, DiIulio hinted that Mike Nutter, or his senior lieutenant, would see our presentation on reducing violent crime in Philadelphia. We'd get to influence - directly - then Mayor-elect Nutter.

For public policy geeks like me, this is better than meeting Tom Brady (he's a loser anyway). It's more like getting asked to sub in for a couple of downs. It's a little scary, extremely exciting and all without the risk of getting blindsided by a blitzing safety.

Unfortunately, Bill Belichick is more likely to let me line up under center than most politicians are to listen to my policy proposals. While the class talked with some amazing and influential people dedicated to reducing youth violence and improving education in Philadelphia, we never saw the new mayor. Although most of us were bitterly disappointed, I have hope yet that our work won't be ignored.

My optimism is bolstered by the experiences of students in other "Ideas in Action" seminars. College Senior Michael Poll took an Environmental Studies course tasked with presenting Vice President Craig Carnaroli and other administrators a series of recommendations for Penn's comprehensive sustainability plan.

"I felt like I was listened to," he said, citing the University's cooperation with PEG as evidence.

Poll's class made a difference, which is a pretty remarkable thing for a collection of people more likely to be seen doing keg stands than watching C-SPAN.

"You can look at places where teams of Penn students have moved the ball," said Kettl. "One of the biggest lessons of all is where and how that happens."

That's the lesson I've come to cherish most and it's one that can't be taught in a traditional class. The University must consider expanding the "Ideas in Action" program substantially, and eventually making it a requirement. Mayor Nutter's administration might not have listened to my recommendations, but hopefully Penn's administration will.

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