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Prices and Patriotism: Restoring Lost Value

Peter Kennel

In the article “The Real Value of Higher Education,” Tom Ross, president of the University of North Carolina System, calls North Carolina and the nation as a whole to invest more time, thought, and resources in higher education. Ross asserts that America is becoming too focused on the professional world and has lost sight of the true value of education (2). While acknowledging the importance of the professional sphere, he contends that focusing more on education would lead to far-reaching benefits to society and the economy.

To support his claim, Ross attributes a number of specific benefits to universities, claiming that they have historically been regarded as “places of big discoveries and bigger dreams,” places where America has solved many of its most difficult problems, and places where “generations of students have learned to think for themselves and how to work collaboratively with others” (2-3). Ross then contrasts this view of universities with how he claims America views them today. He states that they are increasingly regarded as “factories” where people are trained as efficiently as possible to enter the workforce (3).

Ross opposes this new definition of higher education with a warning that too much focus on the workforce and extreme operational efficiency puts the benefits he has attributed to the former definition at risk. He asserts that America has been great because its system of higher education “has been the best in the world,” claiming that universities have been foundational to America’s “democratic society” by developing the talents of communication and critical thought (4). Continuing from this claim, Ross warns that America is losing this commitment to higher education and now spends about 30% less per college or university student that it did 25 years ago (4). He claims that America is “beginning to pay the price” of defunding

education, and while other nations are investing increasing amounts in their higher education systems, American students are finding it increasingly difficult to afford tuition and are incurring significant debts (4-5). Ross claims that this is “a dangerous trend,” and that he is convinced America is headed down the wrong road with regard to the funding of higher education (5, 7).

To illustrate this principle and the challenges that arise from it, Ross turns to his own UNC System as an example. He provides statistics about its size and role in the North Carolina economy, claiming that UNC enrolls 220,000 students from around the nation and the globe, has 60,000 employees (which he claims is more than any private enterprise in the state), has a budget of over 9 billion dollars, and has the impact of generating 426,000 new jobs and 6.4 percent of the state’s annual GDP (5-6). In spite of these numbers, Ross asserts that his administration is “operating in an environment of shrinking resources” (6). He cites decreased state investment as the cause of a number of problems for his university, including increased tuition, dropping enrollment, loss of faculty, and shrinking funding for on-campus research (6-14). Ross provides a number of statistics and examples to support his assertion; in one particular example, he attempts to demonstrate that a loss of faculty, which he claims results from decreasing state dollars, has caused a drop in enrollment (12-13). Ross claims, however, that his administration is taking steps to address these issues and increase operational efficiency. He calls America as a whole to become involved in this process as well, suggesting several possible solutions to the issues he has brought up, including renewed state funding for public universities, better incentives for qualified individuals to enter the teaching profession, and increased funding for research (6-14).

Ross contends that more of this kind of investment in higher education and the subsequent development of mental talents would lead to great benefits in both the public and private spheres. From the public perspective, he states that it would make America more competitive in the global economy, strengthen the domestic economy, give rise to stronger communities, lead to greater political participation among the citizenry, lower demand for social services,

lessen poverty, and reduce crime; from the private perspective, he asserts that it would lead to greater health, higher chances of employment, and a better standard of life. In light of these stated benefits, he calls Americans to invest in the future of their posterity by reestablishing higher standards of educational attainment.

Ross has effectively designed his argument to appeal to the concerns of the contemporary American citizen; in a reasonable yet impassioned and urgent tone, he connects greater investment in higher education with achieving the foremost goals of today's social and political scene to create a powerful pathos, backing his claim with a large body of first-hand evidence, which forms a solid ethos and provides just the right amount of logos to make his argument seem reasonable. Ross shows an impressive understanding of the contemporary political discourse in how he exploits it to form his pathos; he draws his audience to his side of the debate by appealing to their sense of national pride and their concerns about the current state and future of the country. Though his argument is unlikely to firmly convince a scholarly audience due to scarcity of outside references and general failure to cite sources of information, it is well designed to accomplish its intended purpose.

Ross's tone is especially well-suited to add subconscious credibility to his argument, subtly creating both ethos and pathos. By using qualifiers such as "in some significant measure" and limiting the scope of his claims, he presents his argument in an informative and reasonable light yet speaks with a great deal of urgency and strength of purpose; this works to pacify and gain the interest of the audience, though they may not initially agree with him, making them willing to listen to what he has to say (4). After he has gained their attention, Ross focuses every word and the entire structure of his argument on creating the impression of patriotism and a genuine interest for the common good. He refers to America with terms such as "democratic" and "great" on multiple occasions and draws on a vocabulary of social progress and consequences, using positive terms such as "better" and "stronger" to refer to the results of his proposed investment and negative terms such as "dangerous" and "disaster" to refer to the status quo of decreasing emphasis on higher education (4, 5, 8, 13, 15). In addition to creating an appeal to the audience's patriotism, this serves to polarize the issue in favor of his perspective. His use of we to refer to both himself

and the audience throughout the article serves to create a sense of camaraderie, indicating that he and the audience are both seeking the same goal as Americans.

Building on this image of civic concern, Ross begins weaving the threads of his pathos. By focusing on the benefits higher education can provide to America and its citizens, Ross creates a powerful appeal to his audience's sense of civic duty. Ross exploits contemporary domestic concerns to solicit a positive emotional response by asserting that higher educational attainment would lead to various societal benefits such as reduced crime and poverty (7, 8, 15). By referring to universities in glowing terms such as "the foundation of our democratic society" and calling education, among other things, "the great equalizer" and "the pathway to opportunity," he recruits the positive reaction evoked by these expressions to support his cause (4, 15). Also, he repeatedly exploits concern over America's narrowing lead in the world marketplace by equating better education with the ability to compete in the global scene and implying that other nations are beginning to overtake America because they are investing more in education while America is investing less (4, 7, 13). This focus on global competition becomes the source of Ross's major rebuttal to those who think America already produces too many college graduates, when he states the special talent endowed by higher education "will provide the competitive edge of the future" (7).

Through these factors, Ross associates investing in higher education with multiple grails of contemporary American thought to create the core of his pathos. By equating his goal with progress towards higher standards of life, lower crime rates, less unemployment, greater economic security, stronger communities, better health, and political participation, Ross equates the current trend away from higher education with the reverse, effectively placing his opposition at direct odds with the American dream. He draws on every hope, dream, aspiration, and fear of the typical contemporary American mind and ties them together in a complex, strongly worded, and seemingly reasonable rope of emotional appeal which he uses to connect his argument to his audience. By the time he is finished, the audience is practically forced to agree with him, or risk the label of "unpatriotic."

Ross also supports his argument with a great deal of statistical information on the subject, most of it from his own administration and therefore firsthand. These specific details, such as his claim that his university system enrolls 220,000 students and creates the equivalent of 426,000 new jobs, help to add ethos to his argument, especially those concerning the scale and contributions of his own university system (5-6). In providing an impressive set of numbers concerning the operation of the UNC System, Ross establishes himself as an authority on his subject. He uses shock and awe tactics, claiming, for instance, that UNC employs more people in the state than private businesses such as Walmart, to forcefully demonstrate why his audience should listen to his views (5-6). He also provides a large amount of specific detail about the challenges his administration faces and what they are doing to address them, including efforts to increase operational efficiency and improve methods of instruction (9-10). This helps to establish his integrity as someone who is actively involved in the issue that he is calling others to become involved in. In a particularly effective set of examples pertaining to on-campus research, Ross brings his discussion of the benefits provided by universities directly into the lives of his audience by citing ways in which the research at UNC has affected them personally and will continue to do so, namely by the development of fruit preservatives, removal of allergens from peanuts, and the creation of medical nanotechnology (11, 12).

These statistics, in addition to providing ethos, help to ground Ross's argument in the real world by providing solid numeric illustrations for the various points of his rhetoric to create logos for his claim. Due to his knowledge of his audience, Ross is careful not to overuse this aspect of his data, but instead creates a balance between sounding informed and not losing the attention of the crowd by inundating them with technical details. Generally, he uses his logos as a logical framework for his pathos, powerfully combining well-targeted emotional appeal seemingly solid reasoning and numbers. One excellent example of this can be found when he concludes from the state's reduced spending per student that America is "disinvesting in higher education, and ... beginning to pay the price" (4). This statement serves as an emotionally driven rebuttal to those that believe America cannot afford to invest more in higher education. Through the statement, Ross not only outlines the issue

of declining investment, but also asserts that America cannot afford to not invest more resources in education; there is a greater price to be paid for its failure to do so. Supporting this claim is an earlier citation by Ross of a quote from New York Times columnist Frank Bruni: “It’s impossible to put a dollar value on a nimble, adaptable intellect...” (3). As Ross has already established this quality as one of the products of higher education, he invites the audience to refer back to this link and transfer the stated value to higher education itself.

In Ross’s logoi, we find one of the greatest weaknesses of his argument, namely the fact that his logical support structure is largely internalized. With a few minor exceptions, Ross relies on the strength of his own reason. Also, he draws data almost exclusively from his own UNC System to convince the audience of his claim, neglecting to provide outside support for his argument. This is most likely due to his attempts to portray himself as an ultimate authority on the subject, but will leave many of the critical thinkers he discusses wondering about how much stock they can put in an argument that contains little reference for further research, seems to summarily dismiss the opposition without bothering to deal with it specifically, and fails to provide any information about where its data came from. For instance, Ross generally fails to support his core premise that higher education cultivates critical thought, instead asking the audience to simply take his word for it by stating “universities have long been known... as places of ideas and debate...” (2). This statement begs the question of, “who has known this?” By excluding outside references, he calls the credibility of the data behind his argument into question and risks losing the ears of the more analytical members of the audience. At the extreme, this issue could actually engender a negative response, raising the question of why the author seems to think he is the only authority worth hearing on the subject.

Despite a general lack of outside support, Tom Ross creates a convincing picture of his vision of the benefits of increased educational investment and attainment through a blend of carefully crafted appeals to the values of contemporary America, impressive statistics, and first-hand data and examples effectively designed to recruit the average American to his position. His careful control over the mood of the audience helps him communicate his point as effectively as possible. As a result, Ross makes a compelling call to restore the educational values he argues that America is losing.