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## Modern universities are devaluing acquisition of knowledge: Weber

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**TEHRAN** - Professor Eric Thomas Weber says modern universities are devaluing the acquisition of knowledge.

“The danger in the trend of devaluing wisdom in education is more troubling than unfairness or missed economic opportunities,” Weber tells the Mehr News Agency.

Following is the text of the interview:

**Q: Wisdom and its transmission have historically been at the heart of the**

**educational process. But several critics now claim that the pursuit of wisdom has become a superfluous extra to the teaching of a shopping-list of marketable skills for future employers. Real wisdom has thus been relegated to the realms of the more esoteric disciplines like philosophy and theology. What is your opinion? Should modern universities impart knowledge as an end in itself, rather than merely as a means? If not, does it pose a danger to wider society?**

A: The developments mentioned in your question are certainly visible in the U.S. They are also in full force wherever countries set economic growth as the primary mission of higher education.

In such regions, universities train for engineering and other profitable careers, but sometimes to the exclusion of the humanities and social sciences. In the United States, there have been several great expansions in university education at a number of periods. When land-grant institutions were formed, higher education was made more available and accessible to large numbers of students who previously could not afford or find admission to colleges and universities. Plus, the G.I. bill supported veterans who returned from war and wished to pursue higher education. Thus, through a few efforts, the higher education system in the United States grew quickly and significantly expanded Americans' opportunities for careers requiring more education.

In leaner years, states come to support higher education less. Some public universities in the United States receive less than 10% of their yearly operating budgets from their states. As such, a higher burden is placed on students thereby to fund their own education. Plus, since tuition cannot make up all the difference needed in many cases, universities have taken drastic measures to cut costs for education. This means that larger and larger class sizes are taught the same material. Also, temporary teachers are employed to a far greater degree than before, in a growing trend. This can only mean tougher conditions for teachers and more difficulty teaching material that requires smaller class sizes. That material is commonly found in the humanities and

social sciences. Then, on top of all this, studies have come out to show how the quality of what is delivered in higher education is diminishing. This should come as no surprise, yet it is used as a justification to cut back further on higher education spending. In this way, many institutions find themselves in a vicious cycle of seeking efficiency, which diminishes quality, resulting in less funding, and so on.

Courses that can be taught in large class sizes, that involve little or no discussion or free thinking, tend to be emphasized. Plus, schools sometimes come to focus on training for certain careers. Training is a valuable activity, but it is not the same thing as educating students.

Training is generally centered on vocations and particular skills refined. By contrast, education is a process that teaches students how to think critically, creatively, and morally. It teaches values and adaptability. Emphasis on vocations can be understandable when people are quite poor and want work to make their lives better. At the same time, however, we can do both. We can train people while we educate them also. The combination is more valuable because it makes people adaptable to changing work and social conditions, and it also empowers them to be engaged citizens, ready to think and speak up about how their lives and their society can be better.

In some colleges and universities, wisdom is still an important value, but these institutions have become the minority. The trouble is that education for wisdom is sometimes less available, supported financially, or encouraged for the poorer people in society. This is troubling because Americans like to believe that opportunities are available for everyone in the country. From the economic point of view, the further challenge is that talent is a distributed commodity, thus when poorer people have less than sufficient opportunities to take advantage of their talents, society as a whole misses out. In all the efforts considered in light of the recession felt around the world in the last few years, it is remarkable how few people have considered education as the excellent avenue that it can be for investment to reinvigorate stalled economies.

The danger in the trend of devaluing wisdom in education is more troubling than unfairness or missed economic opportunities, however. The greatest threat is that uneducated people will lead themselves poorly, making rash choices, backing corrupt or unworthy leaders, and weakening their ability to express the problems that they face. Education for wisdom addresses these problems. It is economic and moral empowerment. It brings flexibility. It raises expectations for leaders. It calls for peace. Bad leaders will want to limit education for these reasons. Good leaders will call for its expansion.

*Dr. Eric Thomas Weber is Assistant Professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS, USA. His second book, *Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy*, was released in 2011 and his third book, *Democracy and Leadership*, will be published in 2012.*



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