

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Quali-fi-cation = Quality in Education

Albert Grimm

This time of year, most students at our local horticulture college are busy practicing seriously complex arithmetic and it has nothing to do with calculating vapor pressures or energy balances. Final exams are a mere three months away, and it's the time to get creative and try to maximize grade averages. Such averages are of great importance because, with precious few exceptions, most students attend college for all but one reason: To obtain a diploma and take advantage of its pledge of good income, prestigious jobs and an end to painfully tedious learning activities.

Sadly, these students are in for a nasty surprise when they try to cash in on these perceived entitlements. In a production greenhouse, nobody cares about their diploma or grade average. In fact, these graduates will be lucky if any prospective employer even wants to see detailed evidence of their skills in navigating post-secondary education. "Real world" horticulture is only interested in asking them one question: What can you accomplish with the knowledge that you took away from school?

And there's the rub. Our education system isn't very effective at emphasizing the knowledge piece. I don't blame the students because it's easy for them to lose sight of the fact that we attend school to learn, when our entire system of higher education appears to exist for the sole purpose of equipping them with diplomas and degrees. Colleges and universities have very gradually morphed from temples of knowledge into businesses that market access to industry by way of graduation papers. Students are seen as the primary customers in this market.

I'm certainly not denying that some schools have very high academic standards. These institutions justifiably pride themselves on graduating only the best of the available talent, but such schools simply cater to an affluent upmarket crowd. Their graduation papers open more exclusive doors, but this advantage comes with a much higher price-tag and is very unlikely to attract students interested in our industry because our billionaire potential is rather limited.

Less prestigious schools may be accessible for the rest of us, but they're typically designed to supply the mass market where high failure rates act as a deterrent. Operating margins depend on the sheer number of students being processed by a program and adequate enrollment is paramount for the success of the school. This mass market approach leads to a dissociation of knowledge and education, and we become accustomed to think of education in terms of diplomas and degrees, while forgetting about the underlying

motivation for learning: The capacity to think and function at increasingly complex levels.

In horticulture, the qualification of specialists is determined primarily by the depth of passion for their chosen career. This is where we come in. If our industry wants to survive and remain competitive, we need to create and encourage knowledge-motivated students, instead of rummaging for quality among the grade-motivated customers of our education system. We have to help students develop passion that cannot be learned from textbooks. We cannot task professional educators with providing genuine inspiration—because most of them have never experienced the thrill of successfully planning, managing and completing a production crop cycle. Such passion can only be learned from other horticulturists who have lived through the grit and sweat that comes with navigating the obstacles of greenhouse reality.

The average college might not like it if our industry sticks their collective nose into their business, but we must use every opportunity to remain involved. We need to use our experience to spark the interest of students while they're still full-time learners. We need to stimulate excitement in the students for a career in which a need for life-long learning and the opportunity to discover new knowledge prevents the boredom, which is typical of so many occupations. Gratification through accomplishments at work is an important life-skill, which is mostly ignored by career counselors. If industry professionals don't get involved, then the typical classroom tedium is bound to drown any spark of ambition in a sea of mediocrity. In fact, passionate ambition may create an unwelcome challenge for educators who may be well equipped to deliver grades, but often lack the industry experience to satisfy any appetite for knowledge outside of approved textbooks. We cannot expect them to teach what they don't know. **GT**

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