

Through a Glass, Darkly*: IS: Doom and Gloom Forecasts?

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Just a doggone minute, here. I'm really getting tired of doom and gloom forecasts coming from academic IS and its brethren, computer science and software engineering.

Oh, sure, I know that enrollments have plummeted. I know that some IS faculties are getting rid of people at an alarming clip. I know that some academic IS organizations are shutting down.

But that has to be put in some kind of context. At the same time as IS/academe is falling apart, IS/industry is roaring forward. Hiring is up, salaries are rising, and there is talk of a shortage of IS people in industry (caused in large part by that plummeting enrollment of the previous paragraph).

So what's an IS academic to do? My response to all of this is "steady the ship and stay the course." I realize that's pretty facile advice, given the lightning and thunder surrounding most IS departments. And yet I also believe, deeply, that it's the right advice.

The enrollment crisis we're passing through is not that unusual. Every 10 or 15 years, the dramatically-growing field of IS pulls in its horns for awhile, and things get tough. I can remember a time, about 15 years ago, when on a speaking tour of US college campuses I was besieged with IS grads after my talk asking if I could PULEASE, PULEASE help them find a job. Times felt pretty desperate back then. Just as they do now. But it couldn't have been more than a year or two later when things were back to their normal, astonishing, skyrocketing growth curve.

Oh, of course, things are a bit different now. We passed through the dot-com boom a few years ago, and I think we're still suffering from the aftereffects of the "irrational exuberance" that happened back then. That was more than a foolish stock market phenomenon, it was also a foolish academic phenomenon, and we hired far more IS profs than we would normally have needed, just to fulfill the (temporary) enrollment spike spurred by that (temporary) exuberance. So it is certainly true that some jobs have to be eliminated, at this point, even if the upcoming enrollment boom that inevitably will accompany the hiring boom will reduce that need.

Now I realize that a lot of this is old hat. Discussions of this phenomenon have been going on now for over a year; the enrollment bust, the employment spike, all of it has been discussed elsewhere ad infinitum. So why am I chiming in now?

* "Through a Glass, Darkly," is a Biblical expression for the unclear way in which we see the world around us.

I'm getting involved now because I see the voices concerned with enrollment drops getting alarmingly shrill and disturbingly mis-focused. I'm getting involved now because I just finished reading an article in which the author (whom I will leave nameless, hoping that someday he will prove to be deeply embarrassed by what he has written), has said things like

- “the death of computing”
- “the [academic] ship is holed below the waterline ... and sinking”
- “there is the smell of death in the air”
- “...curricula are old, stale, and increasingly irrelevant”

and is advocating things like

- “it no longer makes sense to develop software from scratch,” advocating that we quit teaching programming (it is “not an essential skill”) and teach the “application of technology”

- “Most [academic IS departments] will give way to interdisciplinary study”

Now in my view these kinds of proposals are as disturbing as the irrational exuberance that got us into this fix in the first place. I see no reason to believe that programming is a dying skill (most of our graduates still go into that field). Developing software, even maintaining software, is just as exciting in 2007 as it was in 1957, and 1967, and ... (where else can you build things, significant and world-changing things, with your brain instead of your hands). I smell no death in the air, only a slight unpleasant odor that will soon go away. I feel the same kind of disciplinary excitement in our field that I have been feeling there for the past 50 years!

I'm reminded of the old saying about the baby and the bathwater. In our rush to solve what I believe is a temporary problem, I see some alarmists going way too far.

Steady the ship and stay the course. Help is coming, just as it always has.

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