



WMU President Diether Haenicke

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Diether Haenicke
Western Michigan University

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Whether old or young, readers of this column have interesting insights

*By Diether Haenicke
November 19, 2008*

Everyone who writes a newspaper column gets mail from both happy and disappointed readers. I seldom write about controversial topics, so I rarely receive enraged reader comments. On the contrary, I am often approached in supermarkets and local malls by total strangers to be told that they agree with me on a given opinion and that they enjoy reading my column on Wednesday afternoons.

I like that, of course. I sometimes think that people are better informed about what I do and what I think now than when I was president of Western Michigan University and my opinions and actions actually had consequences.

The column also serves a very practical purpose, I am told. Recently I was approached by an elderly gentleman who told me that he reads the column every week, often twice. He related that he and a group of six other retirees have been meeting regularly for more than 15 years on Thursday mornings for coffee. In the early years of their retirement, their group used to be a book club, and they came together to talk about the book that everyone in the group had read. Over time, reading a whole book each week became too challenging. They selected ever shorter books as a consequence. A little over a year ago, they decided to read my column instead of books. The column appears Wednesdays; they meet Thursday mornings. From one day to the next, every member of the group can still remember what I wrote the day before. Also the length is just right. Seven hundred words cover about the group's whole attention span. They are happy with the column, and I now worry that this group of readers may expire before I do.

I surmise that the readers of my column, in general, are 40 years and older. I think very few young people read it. If they do, it is because their parents clip an occasional column

that is peppered with good advice and send it to their children in college. I fear, though, that the student recipients heed my advice as carefully as they do that of their parents.

Very few students ever write to me. That may have to do with the widely documented fact that their generation no longer produces avid readers of newspapers. Young people glean their information through electronic media, mainly TV, but also via Blackberry, iPods and similar devices. I just hope that the print media will be around as long as I live, because I can't imagine a good life without holding a solid newspaper in my hands.

Because I do not expect to hear from young readers, I was delighted to receive a thoughtful letter the other day from Paul Kramer, a young German high school exchange student housed in Scotts. Like many young Germans, he still reads newspapers and is eager to inform himself about what goes on in the world. In impeccable English he wrote to me that he disagrees with certain aspects of a particular column I wrote in September. I had reflected on the 60th anniversary of the Berlin airlift that saved the historic German capitol from Soviet occupation. At the same time, President Bush made his farewell visit to Germany and was attacked mercilessly by the generally very anti-American German press. I had expressed my indignation and disapproval over the timing of some ugly and arrogant editorials against Bush just at a time when the airlift was memorialized.

In his letter, young Paul Kramer raised some good and important points. Should Germans be expected to refrain from criticism of Bush because Americans once saved their country? At what time does the past become the past and may be appropriately put aside? His fine letter made me think. It became clear to me, once again, that many issues in our modern world are seen differently by other generations. Our diverse life experiences create dissimilar historic perspectives. We cannot agree on everything and must respect our differences. I am just grateful that there still are many thoughtful youngsters like Paul Kramer in this world who read and who think and who take time to talk about important questions with their elders.

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