

9-23-2011

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: For-Profit, or For Purpose?" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 118.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/118

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Our Universities: For-Profit, or For Purpose?

Fourth in a series on state funding for higher education

The human drive to create profit, the Internet and other technologies, are endeavoring to transform higher education. And in part, they have. But digital interaction alone will never be a satisfying substitute for real learning nested in an engaged environment tended to by a passionate teacher and a needy student.

A blind person once asked St. Anthony: "Can there be anything worse than losing eyesight?" He replied: "Yes, losing your vision."

Christian fable

The relationship between public universities and for-profit institutions bears much watching over the next decades. Something is going to break, and the fracture will occur on the line where cost and quality meet.

It has become popular to bemoan how universities are becoming too much like businesses. In fact, if the universities were really run like businesses their missions would have to be unambiguous and uncompromised. If only the marketplace ruled, their product would be understood, and their cost-value proposition would be clear.

Elected officials use this confusion to justify shunting funds to for-profit institutions through student loans and grant programs, making the argument that "everyone has a right to a college degree." Technically, for-profits, with low admission and graduation hurdles, meet this standard. But this isn't the standard employers (The Marketplace) regard. Employers are looking for people with an education, not just a diploma.

Properly established, the organizational structure of a traditional faculty gives it the ability to control the quality of the educational experience. But too many university boards are willing to sacrifice quality for current income and short-term gains. Too many entrepreneurs have recognized that a hefty profit can be generated by making available to anyone who has access to federal grants and loans something that looks like a university. Too many students have been sold the idea that a degree is a golden ticket rather than a symbol of ability and training. Too many states have stopped listening to faculty when they decry the quality of the educational infrastructure. Too many unions have oversold, both internally and publically, the idea that wages and working conditions are the only things of importance to their members.

Recently, even traditional universities have confused a mantra of “meeting the needs of the marketplace” with the concept of “public service,” without fully considering the impact of offering compromised degrees that don’t represent educational attainment.

If a diploma comes to mean merely that you’ve exercised a civil right to avoid joining the workforce for four years, and been financed at what appears to be public expense, that parchment will have less utility than Charmin.

Faculty members and their collective bargaining units frequently portray the working conditions and benefits they receive as if they exist in a vacuum, rather than marketing the contributions they should (and many do) produce. Administrations’ values are no more firmly grounded in reality when they privilege enrollment numbers ahead of real indicators of academic performance.

Learning to think, as opposed to being exposed to momentarily relevant skills, differentiates universities that operate for a purpose from those that operate for profit. In the end, universities operated for purpose will outlast those operated for-profit, but the wreckage that will be created in the interim will be catastrophic, as graduates walk the street with promissory paper of dubious value, pursued by people demanding very concrete loan payments.

Nationally, employers liked big public universities when hiring last year. Penn State, Texas A&M and the University of Illinois produced the most sought after graduates, according to a September 13, 2010, analysis by Wall Street Journal. Cornell marks the entry-level Ivy League position at the thirteenth spot. No other Ivy League school scored in the top 25.

The marketplace is speaking.

Not a single for-profit can be found on the list, yet, according to The Economist’s September 9, 2010 issue, for-profits enrolled 12% of the students in the United States, even though graduation rates for entering freshmen are only 22%, compared to 55% at traditional universities. Students leave for-profits (not, in most cases, graduating) with an average educational debt load that’s more than four times greater than traditional students, according to the Washington-based Education Trust. And they leave seeking scarce or nonexistent jobs.

The marketplace is screaming.

Students and families are beginning to realize they’ve been sold a bill of goods.

Recruiters have said, by action and deed, that they value the qualities found in graduates of campus-based programs delivered in real time to real students, by real faculty. Purpose leads to performance, with or without profit.