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Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our Universities: Outsourcing

I have seen **Enterprise** Rent-A-Car establishments on university campuses. **Chartwells** and other food providers are common sights at our institutions of higher learning. And, it has finally happened. Teaching is also being outsourced now.

Both Florida Atlantic University and Missouri State University recently partnered with the Poynter Institute, a non-profit journalism training group, to outsource their online journalism classes.

Fox Business, Emily Driscoll, March 19, 2012

Housing, police work, medical and counseling services, legal counsel, advertising and marketing, property management, construction management, aviation services, information technology, etc. are being awarded by universities to outside contractors based on competitive bids.

So what?

If the quality is the same, no one should care. These auxiliary activities are important, and I believe that things like a well maintained campus can provide an environment more conducive to study while helping to teach the importance of paying attention to detail. However, these things are secondary concerns compared to excellent teaching and scholarly pursuits, because a university has to be more than just a collection of buildings, however well they may be maintained.

After decades of expansion, the university growth curve is flattening. As it slows (or becomes negative in too many cases), universities are making decisions that risk compromising educational quality in order to address reduced resource streams. However, "Least expensive and, more or less good enough," is not a philosophy that builds world-class universities. It's the philosophy of **Target**, and is crystallized by the hook, "**Expect More Pay Less.**"

What would **Target University** look like? Well, on the plus side, the parking would be good, but the face at the front of the classroom might change from week to week, depending on what sort of deal they could make with an international supplier. Students would simply represent what many universities currently see them as - revenue streams. And, rather than defining the future at the cutting edge, it would pursue last years trends in research and education.

This is not the stuff of great universities.

Good teaching cannot be approached as piecework. A good teacher has to be constantly

aware of how students integrate what they are learning into the rest of their lives. The cashier at Target just wants you to “*Expect More. Pay Less,*” **and get out of the way of the next customer.**

The outsourcing of secondary functions may allow a university to focus more strongly on its core, teaching mission. However, when universities rely on teachers that they treat as mere labor-for-hire, they can affect the priorities of the entire faculty. Rather than stewards, they become supplicants. They learn they must not challenge students or administrators or give any offense, because they are little valued and easily replaced.

Inoffensive educators stop looking to the horizon and start looking at their feet. From that posture, though, how can they prepare students to cross that next ocean or climb that next mountain?

Universities need a clear faculty voice that addresses the calling of their profession and its importance to the future of the nation. What we’ve frequently gotten instead are third-party rehashings of how many credit hours constitute an overload or how to reorganize benefits for the next batch of retirees, both critical but tangential.

Where are the American Federation of Teachers, the American Association of University Professors, and the National Education Association? First, faculty outsourced their leadership to unions. Now the faculty itself is being outsourced. Is compensation vital? Yes, but only after a mutual understanding of the nature of the work is held above all else.

Gains realized from budget flexibility may be a mirage. Outsourcing food may save a few bucks. Maybe. Outsource grounds maintenance, janitorial staff, and housing, and the savings may add up. Maybe, but show me the real dough. While competence may vary, plumbing is not a matter of competing perspectives, and plumbing philosophies (stuff runs downhill) are unlikely to distinguish the services of one contractor from the next. Personally, I’ve never heard a university brag about its longstanding tradition of excellent plumbing, or fleet maintenance, or food preparation.

The essence of the university - enlightened and energetic faculty in contact with the student of like mind and disposition – has to be treated differently. Teaching and scholarship are not ancillary services at a good university and cannot be parceled off to the lowest price providers. Knowledge work must be treated as a long-term investment, not just a current cost.

We can’t afford to waste limited resources. But what is the value of “efficiency” when the priorities of our universities are **Target-ed** down to maximize the sale of low-cost, uniformly produced, discrete packets of information distributed by indistinguishable day laborers.

Sometimes the lowest price isn’t the best deal.