

The Academy Under Siege: Threats to Teaching and Learning in American Higher Education

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In contrast to Mundhenk, Roy Vestrich argues that traditional faculty-centered academic processes are still critical and that some of the manifestations of today's accountability movement threaten to undermine academic integrity and quality.
—Editors' note

In the spring of 1997, I had the opportunity to direct the London Semester program for my institution. Near the end of the semester, after months of touring castles, museums and ruins, my students listened with uncharacteristic amusement to a yeoman warder in full costume spinning varied saucy tales about past inhabitants of the Tower of London. My students were understandably engaged by tales of beheadings and public hangings, by the ominous presence of clipped winged ravens and the implements of torture, and by the monetary value of the crown jewels.

As we toured the ancient grounds, I pondered the murky history of the surrounding moat and shivered at the foreboding brilliance of the narrow entry that could become in a moment's notice a cage and then a cauldron as hot oil was released from above to boil and foil would-be invaders. It was then that I was struck by one consistent thought: these castles, for all their glory and grandeur, were the homes of rulers who were themselves ruled by fear.

At the time, I could not help but feel, with some degree of sadness, that the Tower grounds shared more than merely an architectural similarity to the traditional college campus. What hit me was the troubling reality that the world of the academy has become one in which fear frequently informs the design and sets the course of actions for institutions.

This fear runs deep. It is harbored in all ranks and categories of people who

collectively shape and maintain our higher education institutions, including administrators, trustees, faculty, students, and external constituencies such as businesses, legislatures, local communities and the press. This climate of fear has led to a siege mentality that permeates the decision-making processes at all levels and may hamper the ability of many institutions to maintain or improve the quality of student learning.

For some, especially for faculty, it is a fear of change that seems too fast and insufficiently debated; for particularly business-oriented academic managers, it is a fear of not changing fast enough to keep up with competitors; for others, it is the fear of losing power within institutions and systems; and for some it is the fear of rising costs and rising expectations from external assessors and constituents. At the most basic level, the rapidly shifting nature of the higher education enterprise has engendered for many higher education professionals a fear that their programs, departments, or very institutions will not survive what might amount to an “industry shakeout.”

During a period of declining enrollment and increasing competition for students in the late 1990s, journalist Anne Matthews noted: “The roll of dead American campuses grows each year, little noticed, little mourned.” Matthews went on to point out that “developers convert some into drug-rehab centers or magnet schools; supermarket chains and parks departments eye others.”¹ Perhaps even during that period only a few academic managers and faculty members worried that the local big-box developer or the regional department of recreation was standing in the wings waiting for their campus to fail so that they might have the buildings or land at a bargain price. However, the harsh reality of the times did catalyze a concern for many of us that our work and workplaces, however worthwhile, could be undermined by forces beyond our control. Some will claim that these fears are unjustified, but few will deny that economic pressures; shifting social, cultural, and political demands; and rapidly evolving communication technologies are combining to exert a profound influence on the enterprise of higher education.

An important manifestation of these pressures comes in the form of new “accountability” requirements imposed on higher education. Examples of these may include standardized testing of college students and “performance funding” to colleges and universities for achieving “outputs” such as graduation or job placement rates. Colleges are being told to hold themselves accountable to

“students as customers” and, therefore, are re-orienting academic programs and student services around pleasing students’ short-term desires. College faculty members are being asked to embrace distance education wholesale on grounds of ease and efficiency for the student, replacing face-to-face interaction between the student and the professor. Whether these changes are corroding educational quality or renewing higher education’s mission to fit today’s needs is, of course, a matter of opinion.

Faculty and professional staff should not simply circle the wagons or dig into trenches and defend the status quo as the world shifts around them. However, it is appropriate for those of us working with students every day to raise serious questions about the potential of the latest fads in institutional accountability that may undermine the things we believe traditional higher education does *right*. We have seen charts and data showing how many or few students pass standardized tests or were “pushed through the system” to graduation in primary and secondary education, and we know how these measures of dubious value have been used to attack public education and educators. We do not want such questionable indicators to replace autonomous intellectual inquiry, squelch creativity, impair original research and scholarship, or most importantly restrict the breadth and depth of student learning in higher education.

It is no accident that so many new nostrums are being initiated by government officials, think-tank academics and management specialists, rather than the working faculty. Sometimes, in fact, the people who call for new accountability regimes view it as a badge of honor that their proposals are free of faculty input. Actually, it should be a warning alarm that something is very wrong. Those who march under the banner of accountability should be obligated to make sure that they are not impairing important elements of educational success.

If, for example, the scope and focus of research, scholarship and even the arts on campus are primarily accountable to corporate sponsors or government officials, rather than dictated by the independent creativity and curiosity of scholars, then the quality of these endeavors and the possibility of making progress through open inquiry may be impaired. We need only think of the intense pressure exerted on American higher education institutions, and particularly the teaching faculty, during the McCarthy period of the 1950s to understand how stultifying such thinking can be to the free exchange of ideas. We should

not believe ourselves now immune to the kind of intrusive policies and chilling effects of the McCarthy period.

For example, some of the more conservative American political leaders, responding to the fallout from the attacks of September 11, 2001, recently have stepped up calls for political litmus tests to be used in the faculty hiring process (to offset the perceived liberal bias of faculty), and many scholars, pundits and social theorists have pointed to the potential chilling effect of the Patriot Act on freedom of speech, inquiry and thought.

We must consider, too, all the implications of the advent of electronic education, where information is conveyed and ideas are debated in the faceless and non-specific spaces of computer monitors, podcasts, and streaming video. To their credit, these technologies open the door to new information sources and permit learning to take place in a convenient fashion. However, an overreliance on these ways of communicating may have seriously deleterious effects on social interaction skills and collaborative problem-solving skills that have been essential in the development of what we commonly call human culture and society.

In fact, we may well come to a future when teachers and students are no longer linked in a geographically defined space, a *community* of scholars and learners such as the traditional college campus, but rather are linked solely via electronically mediated environments, or at best in nonresidential or commuter-based campuses. The residential campuses that remain may become largely reserves for the elite, or will function much like year-round sleep-away camps catering more and more to the entertainment needs of young adults, investing fewer and fewer resources in the teaching personnel central to their core missions.

For faculty, this shift away from physical learning communities and the de-emphasizing of academics in budgetary priorities could mean a radically different professional life. It could potentially redefine faculty's relationship to institutions, from core employees who shape the life of institutions, to program consultants or temporary hired hands who carry out policies and curricular tasks developed by noneducators. For students, this shift could mean far less guidance and individualized instruction, increasingly limited face-to-face contact with faculty, far less interaction with peers both in social and academic contexts, and far less opportunity to encounter a diverse range of opinions, ideas and ap-

proaches to academic subject matter.

In this time of rapid technological advancement for information transfer, it may be possible to conceive of a higher education delivery system that is almost void of bricks and mortar. But again, we must ask ourselves if such a system can be a secure cornerstone for shaping a society of involved citizens and for developing critical thinkers, creative spirits and engaged life-long learners.

If we look at these current trends in higher education, it is not all that hard to imagine a future when some of our most historic campuses might be themselves reduced, like the Tower of London, to mere curiosities for tourists who are escorted by guides donned in academic regalia. Giving short shrift to the important work performed by dedicated professors and students in the classrooms and laboratories, the guides will spin stories of saucy and salacious events, such as the sit-ins and love-ins of the 60s, the high jinks and hazing rituals of toga-wrapped fraternity brothers, or the epidemic of binge drinking that too often defined the popular culture images of campus life at the turn of the millennium.

This future has little appeal to those of us who have spent our lives at more traditional institutions, first as students and later as faculty members. It certainly should not resonate with the general population for many reasons, of which the most compelling should be that such a system has the potential to degrade the intellectual content and personal interchange that define a quality collegiate experience. There is much formal research recognizing the value of face-to-face human interaction as well as the importance of social relationships as part of the learning process. Even some proponents of education delivery systems that rely on the new information technologies recognize that the lack of teacher-student and student-student communication has been the Achilles' heel of such learning environments.²

Another factor that makes it difficult for college faculty to embrace some aspects of the outside accountability movement is the fact that so many of its proponents explicitly or implicitly label college professors as the problem within the system, the people who are preventing change because they are afraid to be accountable to anyone for anything. To take an extreme but not altogether atypical example, during the early stages of the public debate on accountability, Charles J. Sykes published his sharp indictment of the American professoriate,

Profscam. Sykes began his ill-willed work by paraphrasing H.L. Mencken's terse jibe that "anyone who really wanted to improve the universities should start by burning the buildings and hanging the professors." And Sykes went on to structure an argument around his dubious contention that "the story of the collapse of American higher education is the story of the rise of the professoriate."³

In the years since the publication of Sykes's work, more than a handful of well-respected education and social theorists have challenged and debunked his theories; but there can be no doubt that Sykes, by casting the American professor as the "real villain" to blame for the problems in American higher education, helped shape public thought and set a new agenda for greater accountability. This agenda equates true accountability with shedding any traditional academic process that reposes in college faculty the responsibility (and autonomy) for determining what the curriculum should be, teaching students in an atmosphere of academic freedom, and assessing student performance on the basis of the grades achieved by students in their classes.

Most faculty members believe that there is little justification for abandoning their autonomy. After all, higher education is a great success story. To illustrate this in purely industrial terms, just over 200,000 Americans attended college at the turn of the 20th century, 1.4 million by 1940, 2.4 million by 1946 (with the passage of GI Bill). The number more than doubled from 3.2 million in 1960 to 7.5 million in 1970, and by the end of the 20th century the number of American postsecondary students exceeded 20 million. Clearly this has been a growth industry, and one that the citizens of our society believe to be highly important in their personal and economic development.

On the other hand, as I once noted, "higher education may be a victim of its own success as an industry."⁴ Because possessing a college degree is now essential for many in our socio-economic framework, the power brokers and the general population have increased their scrutiny of higher education. As a college degree has become necessary to reach the first rung of many career ladders, the costs of tuitions and fees have risen. Together, these two developments have made legislative bodies and the public increasingly concerned about the real value of postsecondary education as a personal and social investment. In turn, this concern has given rise to the relatively recent phenomenon of legislatures identifying specific student outcomes and dictating how higher-education

institutions should prove that they are achieving these outcomes. By redefining their role, legislators have expanded their power to define the mission and manage the activities of any institution, whether public or private, that relies to some degree on public funding.

We have witnessed a host of federal- and state-level boards and commissions conducting cost-benefit analyses of resources expended for postsecondary education. Often these analyses focus on somewhat measurable, though not necessarily indicative, variables such as graduation rates of institutions or the job placement statistics for graduates. We have also seen a rapid rise in federal and state calls for codifying and standardizing means of measuring student learning in terms of outcomes and, more generally, in terms of the role of institutions in the sphere of workforce development.

This latter issue of workforce development has become a central concern for many of the trustees and managers at our nation's public institutions as they lobby for increasingly scarce state resources. One of the most compelling lines of argument used to increase or maintain support for individual public institutions has been to focus on its role as an economic engine or training ground for regional employers. There is nothing inherently wrong with this as part of the institutional mission, but we run a dangerous course if, given all we know about economic cycles and the volatility of business, we overweight the immediate job placement of graduates as an institutional accountability measure, or if we are mandated to tailor curriculum to the specific needs of a regional employer.

For many faculty, one of the more visible aspects of this era of accountability has been the proliferation of "activist trustees" who feel themselves suddenly obligated to play a more direct role in academic program and departmental curricular matters. At times these trustees operate in a web of suspicion about faculty judgment not far from the pages of *Profscam*. Just as Sykes identified the professoriate as the "villain," many faculty members have come to identify some academic administrators and trustees as the real villains in the contemporary crisis in American higher education. However, this view might also be seen as counterproductive and no different than Sykes's broad labeling of faculty. Without question, there are many well-informed and well-intentioned men and women who hold administrative positions at all levels of the academy; and many have dedicated themselves to improving higher education by better

facilitating learning, research, scholarship and the general quality of life at both institutional and broader levels. The problem is not the general dedication of the individuals in these positions, but that too often the decisions, hailing from corporate rather than educational foundations, have imposed inappropriate aspects of corporate thinking into higher education administration, and have interfered with, rather than improved, the intellectual climate of our institutions.

But this is not a wholly new phenomenon. Consider this passage from John Dewey's 1940 essay "The Liberal College and Its Enemies":

In a country which began with no provision for higher education, in which population is rapidly expanding and where wealth is growing and so diffused that the children of those who were themselves forbidden a college education are in a position to gratify ambition to "go to college," expansion is necessary. It is not necessary to allege conspiracy when it is discovered that the members of college boards of trustees are largely men of wealth and that men of wealth are quite likely to be directors of corporations. It would be matter of surprise were it otherwise, where education is in process of constant expansion which requires constant increase and profitable investment of funds. The fact that boards of trustees do not confine their functions to the care of funds, leaving the care of souls to the instructing body, is an historic accident, which none the less makes for a lowered standard of intellectual productivity—which it must always be remembered is synonymous with intellectual freedom.⁵

Dewey, I imagine, would not be surprised to learn that "historic accident" of trustees who do not confine themselves to the fiscal matters, but insert themselves into academic policy, has become commonplace in a national higher education system that has enjoyed exponential growth over the past 65 years. And I imagine as well that he would be profoundly concerned about the potential erosion of intellectual freedom and productivity, and the devaluing of the traditional role of faculty in our institutions.

This devaluing of the faculty is, as I asserted earlier, most evident in the now

widely held notion among policymakers and academic administrators with a corporate mindset, that the student is a customer, a consumer, rather than a learner.

I am not suggesting that the idea of the student as a customer or a consumer is in itself completely negative. At its best, the idea of student-as-consumer encourages all of us—policymakers, professors and students—to consider the value of a higher education. My concern is that marketplace values may usurp all others and become the primary measures of our success. There is a danger that students will become consumers first and foremost, threatening the integrity and quality of student learning. Sociologist David Riesman has suggested that “even the most shoddy, cut rate and cutthroat degrees are not necessarily frauds on the student consumer. They may in fact be examples of collusion between academic vendor and student buyer to secure a credential at some monetary cost but almost no cost in time or effort.”⁶

The student-as-consumer notion too often informs strategic planning at our institutions, and it has become evident in every aspect of campus life. For example, spending priorities have shifted, leading many institutions to spend more on sports and extracurricular activities and less on instruction (ratcheting up class size or relying on part-time faculty as a result). The influence of viewing students as consumers also can be seen in the research agendas, pedagogical methods and grading policies of faculty. And it is evident in the means employed for institutional assessment of student learning or outcomes. Many traditional students and their parents have taken this notion too much to heart, a fact I have faced too often as a union officer dealing with an increasing number of faculty grievances and administrative actions related to student complaints about low grades or course demands. It is a notion that has led some of my students to refer, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to the degrees they receive after four years of study not as diplomas but as receipts.

Like most higher education faculty teaching today, faculty at my institution (a public four-year institution) have had to address these calls for accountability. More and more of our work hours are spent resigning ourselves to the prevailing zeitgeist of outcomes assessment. There is much good that could come of increased faculty attention to student outcomes; in an ideal world, outcomes assessment would help individual faculty retool and improve course designs

and pedagogical methods. But too often the kinds of outcomes assessments under consideration are not tied to specific courses or areas of study, but instead are broad and sweeping evaluations of student knowledge and skills through methods such as standardized tests. Such assessments may reveal some basic information, but it is extremely difficult to translate the findings into meaningful curricular evaluation and design. Still, this broad style of assessment is a dominant part of the current movement.

To illustrate this issue, consider the following account of a meeting I had with the chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges system in 2001. At the time of the meeting, I was serving as president of the faculty federation, the AFT-affiliated local representing both the full-time and part-time faculty at four of the five system institutions. I had been asked to sit down with the chancellor on behalf of both the faculty union and the independent shared-governance bodies of our institutions, the faculty assemblies (equivalent to the faculty senates at many institutions). My mission was to present a host of faculty concerns regarding a mandate from the board of trustees and central administrative office requiring the VSC institutions to institute new outcomes assessment measures in five areas of knowledge. The trustees and the central administration had defined these areas as minimum competencies for graduation.

Included in these minimum competencies were the obvious items to measure such as writing, speaking and quantitative reasoning skills, and some more difficult outcomes to assess such as critical thinking and information literacy. It was clear from the charges given to the faculty that the administration was looking for us to develop something along the lines of a standardized testing methodology. I should point out that given the fairly strong language in both our collective bargaining agreement and the policies of our faculty assembly bodies, the administration could not merely impose these new standards, but needed to go through appropriate faculty governance channels. Still, it was apparent that the trustees and central administration believed that individual faculty members teaching a particular course title should teach essentially the same course and student outcomes therefore should be more or less uniform and measurable. On the surface, this notion might seem sensible, especially in basic skills courses, or in fundamental math and science courses, but it has little validity in courses requiring analysis and interpretation of literary or artistic works, or even in historical and sociological investigation.

For faculty such a notion of uniform methods and outcomes is anathema to our understanding of student learning and instructional autonomy, and the call for uniformity raises significant questions about the range and scope of academic freedom and the very definitions of knowledge. This view of homogeneous and interchangeable instruction is widely seen by faculty to be founded in the limited experience of academic managers and their misinformed beliefs about the nature of pedagogy, learning and the profession. A colleague and I frequently refer to this troubling notion of education as the mere transference of neatly packaged modules of information that can be stacked up free of human interference as the “*Lego Block Theory of Teaching and Learning*.”

In real-life classrooms, however, a student’s knowledge and skills are not easily measured commodities transferred from the teacher to the student, but are complex syntheses of information, experience, and both critical and creative reasoning. Faculty members are not simply conduits for the transfer of blocks of knowledge and students are not simply receptors. Teaching and learning at the postsecondary level are most often processes involving the exchange and debate of ideas, perceptions, opinions, conjectures and analyses. Though there are certainly residual elements of the lecture-based, faculty-centered teaching style in many institutions, contemporary faculty at the vast majority of our nation’s teaching institutions rarely function as sages handing over the wisdom of the ages to a new generation, but are far more often guides and facilitators helping students to uncover and discover material.

The outcome of this in many courses, particularly in the arts, humanities, history and higher-level science, is that individual students vary in their understanding and integration of materials even within a course taught by the same instructor. These variations are part of the education process and they are an appropriate outcome of student learning, but they are not easily measured in standardized format. Rather than spending so much of our time, energy and financial resources in reassessing what a student has learned in a particular course, it seems far more logical and efficient to make sure that faculty have the necessary time, resources and support to do their jobs well and provide appropriate feedback to students in a variety of manners, one of which is the assigning of grades for the work that students produce.

During the meeting with the chancellor I referred to earlier, I pointed out (both

orally and in writing) several weaknesses of the trustee-driven minimum competencies mandate. For example, there was no documentation that students were not, in fact, learning what they needed to be successful graduates, as well as little evidence offered that other institutions were employing similar broad criteria, let alone whether they were employing them successfully. The timeline for implementation was wholly unrealistic, and the fundamental belief about education and assessment—that is the *Lego Block Theory*—was misguided. I came armed with suggestions for a less standardized form of testing and far more faculty-specific and course-embedded means of assessment.

The chancellor clearly was trying to find a way to accommodate some of the faculty concerns. But it also was clear that he was not convinced about the validity of faculty-driven assessment of learning. He leaned across the table and said: “I’ll tell you what it’s [the means of assessment] not going to be, it’s not going to be that just because a student sat in a faculty’s course and got a good grade that we are going to assume he learned anything.”

On the surface, such a comment might seem appealing to higher education’s critics. Why should we merely assume that faculty actually teach something and then assess the learning of their students? But it is just as legitimate to ask in return; Why do we assume that faculty are *not* really teaching something and assess the learning of their students? What evidence do we have that real education is not taking place? There are genuine problems to address in higher education—the inadequate preparation of students entering our doors, the move to cut budgets without regard to educational value, the need to do a better job of retaining students. But faculty are right to reject the implicit notion that the answer to our difficulties is to find a better way of producing numbers in assessment documents rather than a better way of supporting dedicated professionals and their students on campus.

Over time, American colleges and universities have developed into institutional cultures and academic communities in which faculty hold primary responsibility for program development and curricular matters; engage in shared governance through established structures such as faculty senates, collective-bargaining organizations and joint committees; conduct teaching and research under an umbrella of academic freedom and instructional autonomy serving to promote intellectual inquiry and invention; and enjoy a certain degree of

employment stability after successfully completing the often rigorous process of earning tenure or multiyear renewable contracts (at institutions without tenure provisions).

It has become almost faddish to assert that these processes, particularly tenure for full-time faculty, do nothing more than give the faculty so much autonomy and job security that they cease caring about their students and working hard for them. This is not so clear, however, when one looks at the facts.

For example, in the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) system, which consists of five institutions (three four-year institutions, a two-year technology institute and a community college spread out over 12 locations around the state), enrollments by headcount grew by over 3,000 students between 1990 and 2004 to the current level of approximately 12,000 students, but the number of full-time faculty in the system has remained relatively constant, hovering between 260 and 275 during the same period. This is due to the fact that this system, like many others, has severely limited the hiring of new full-time tenure-track faculty and opted instead for more part-time faculty. The institution with the largest growth in enrollment, the Community College of Vermont (CCV), has no full-time faculty, but relies solely on part-time instructors.⁷

The Vermont model can be utilized to demonstrate some of the potential problems associated with the breakdown of traditional institutions. At the four campus-based institutions, the faculty fall more or less into the traditional institution mode; and even in the hardest of times, such as contentious labor disputes during contract negotiations, there is a strong sense of community at each campus. On the other hand, CCV faculty members, or I should say “instructors” since the college does not use the term “faculty,” have no official place in institutional decision-making, have no job security, no offices, no phones, a pay-rate below their counterparts in the unionized part-time faculty at the other institutions, no healthcare or retirement benefits, minimal opportunities for professional development and little incentive for developing loyalty to the institution. As attractive as this model is from a purely financial perspective in its ability to keep instructional costs down and therefore increase accessibility, especially for lower-income and nontraditional students, one must ask questions about the impact of such a transient instructor structure on the scope and quality of student learning.

Recently, Maine restructured its technological centers into a new community college system that is similar to the Vermont model in its heavy reliance on part-time faculty and its programmatic ties to state workforce development needs. A number of faculty leaders in the Maine University system have expressed concern that the Maine Community College and statewide system reorganization will undermine the future viability of the more traditional institutions.⁸

The Vermont and Maine community college models and analogous systems around the nation will, as they evolve, present real challenges to traditional academic institutions, particularly to public comprehensive institutions as they are forced to adjust to an evermore competitive environment for attracting students and securing state or federal resources. But these challenges may be minor compared to those presented by the new players in higher education from both profit and nonprofit sectors that are committed to the expansion and acceptance of technology-based distance learning delivery systems. Olcott and Schmidt note: “Increased accountability by public, legislatures and new student ‘consumers’ has served as a catalyst for academic leaders and policymakers to re-examine the traditional mission structures, and functions of the university and its faculty.”⁹

The authors argue that faculty should embrace changes engendered by the technological revolution and become active players in the “transformational markets” created by newly empowered student consumers. Central to this thinking is that only insulated academics themselves care about higher education traditions, and the external constituencies, such as businesses, the public and legislatures, as well as students/consumers themselves, ultimately care only about cost-effectiveness and “producing graduates who are employable and have skills needed to enter the workforce.”¹⁰

Having had numerous opportunities to testify on higher education issues at both state and federal levels over the past decade, I can say with some authority that many legislators do indeed care about issues of student learning and success that are broader than merely employment statistics, costs and graduation rates. Still, the idea that graduates should be prepared for the workplace and exit with documented employment skills has become, as I mentioned earlier, a central force in trustee and institutional strategic planning. Given the significant costs of a college education and the high debt loads of many graduates, it is a reasonable

concern. But to assume it has not been an element considered by faculty involved in program development in previous and current generations is patently false. Only at the most elite of institutions or in some especially theory-based graduate programs have faculty ever felt free to ignore how their approaches to subject matter and their overall contribution to students' development might fit into the "real world" outside of academia. And even these most eclectic of faculty may have understood themselves to be in the curious business of colleague creation, preparing the next generation of scholars, researchers and teachers.

The fact that faculty hold themselves accountable for the general employment skills of their students, along with the breadth and depth of knowledge, is not new. What has changed, however, is that faculty are now being asked to align their students' skills and knowledge with the needs of specific businesses and external stakeholders that can exert pressure on institutional managers and leaders. These pressures can lead to planning that is myopic in scope and practice, and potentially damaging to the core mission of most traditional American higher education institutions.

Though mission statements vary from college to college in wording and emphasis, it is probably safe to suggest that a generic form might read: *The mission of this college is to foster broadly educated, productive citizens, who are capable of critical thinking and possess the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to contribute to society in positive, meaningful ways and to engage in lifelong learning.*

We can compare this admittedly generic mission statement with the very specific mission of a leading for-profit institution, the University of Phoenix:

The mission of the University of Phoenix is to educate working adults to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to achieve their professional goals, improve the productivity of their organizations, and provide leadership and service to their communities.¹¹

In the latter mission statement, a fairly rote form of teaching and the measurement of placement rates make sense as forms of accountability. In the first mission statement, simplistic formulas of this nature do not seem to make much sense. The differences between these statements should become apparent

immediately. The first recognizes that higher education serves a greater purpose in the development of society and culture; the second emphasizes the benefits to individuals and employers in a market economy.

Faculty members are right—and within their rights—to view the latter with suspicion, even fear, and to defend those aspects of traditional higher education that are threatened by poor planning and thinking but are worth preserving. The crisis in American higher education may come down to a tug-of-war, pitting those who believe in the value of history, intellectual inquiry, and the social responsibility of individuals and institutions, against those who believe in the primacy of competition and the pursuit of individual advancement within a corporate culture. In a recent interview, the authors of a recent study on the changes taking place in American universities, Zemsky, Wegner and Massy, express a similar critical concern:

What worries us most is that universities and colleges have become so preoccupied with succeeding in a world of markets that they too often forget the need to be places of public purpose as well... More than ever before, these institutions are content to advance graduates merely in their private, individual capacities as workers and professionals. In the rush to achieve market success, what has fallen to the wayside for too many institutions is the concept of educating students as citizens — graduates who understand their obligations to contribute to the collective well-being as active participants in a free and deliberative society. In the race for private advantage, market success too often becomes a proxy for mission attainment.¹²

For academics and academic policymakers, these are indeed turbulent times. If we are in the process of moving out of the “industrial age” into the “information age,” we need to be careful not to assume that planning for the future means discarding the past. We might be able to learn valuable lessons from the educational planners who struggled with a shift from a preindustrial to a highly mechanized society more than a century ago. I, for one, believe there is common ground to be found on which the future structures of higher education can take shape. We need to temper the rush to utilize new technologies with our deep

understanding of sound pedagogical practice and a genuine appreciation for academic traditions. For these evolving and emerging higher education structures to be sound environments for student achievement, they must be rooted in the deep and solid foundations of our traditional learning communities that have stood the test of time.

ENDNOTES

¹ Anne Matthews, *Bright College Years: Inside the American Campus Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 234.

² Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, "Tower of Babel Syndrome in the Discourse on Information Technologies in Higher Education," *Global E-Journal of Open Flexible and Distance Education 2001* (2001): 28-38.

³ Charles J. Sykes, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.:Regnery Gateway 3, 1988).

⁴ Roy Vestrich, "Barbarians at the Campus Gates: Popular Culture and Higher Education Reform" (Panel presentation at Popular Culture Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, Cal., 1999).

⁵ John Dewey, *Education Today* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1940), 192.

⁶ David Riesman, *On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in the Era of Rising Student Consumerism* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998), 117.

⁷ Information on enrollment and employment available at www.vsc.edu.

⁸ Reports of concerns about the Maine restructuring appeared in numerous sources: see *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 1, 2004.

⁹ Don Olcott, Jr. and K.J. Schmidt, "Redefining Faculty Policies and Practices for the Knowledge Age. *Global E-Journal of Open Flexible and Distance Education 2001*: 46-61. Available on-line: www.ignou.ac.in/e-journal/contents/don_olcott.htm.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹ Mission statement available on the University of Phoenix Web site: www.phoenix.edu.

¹² Interview from *Inside Higher Ed* (online, September 22, 2005): www.insidehighered.com.