The Conflicts of the Faculty

MARSHALL SAHLINS
U CHICAGO

The pursuit of disinterested knowledge by self-interested people: as a one-line review of the US research university, the formula will admit of some exceptions, but to paraphrase Thorstein Veblen, its near-perfection should not be held against it. Veblen’s Higher Learning in America (1957/1918) remains the classic description of the pervasive competition between universities acting like business concerns.

Capitalist Academics in America

Veblen was a strong partisan of the Germanic-Romantic ideal of the research university. In Higher Learning, he fired off the first salvo of its still-going but losing battle with the US spirit of capitalism. The book essentially transposed Veblen’s well-honed opposition between matter-of-fact workmanship and predatory business to the differences within the academy between disinterested scholarship and the businesslike animus of the governing boards and their appointed university presidents.

The university, he said, “is the one great institution of modern times that works to no ulterior end and is controlled by no consideration of expediency beyond its own work.” The position was radically antifunctionalist as well as antimilitarian, holding that the university should serve no outside purpose lest it do disservice to itself. As an institution in itself and for itself, it also had to be by itself, inasmuch as any external finality would undermine the self-determination of goals, methods, rhythms and other epistemological necessities by which knowledge is best acquired and imparted. But where the professoriate is in principle committed to the search for truth, the university directorate serves its own vanity by engaging the institution in a competitive struggle for notoriety with a view toward engrossing the traffic in merchantable knowledge at the expense of other universities.

To put the issues in Foucauldian terms, Veblen was speaking of conflicting regimes of truth—and of disciplinarity, too, in the double sense of academic subjects and controlling the inmates. Referring often to scholarly work as “the cult of idle curiosity,” he intended a contrast not only to “practical utility” but to the whole bureaucratic apparatus of departments, faculty ranks, coursework scheduling, grades and credits that had lately been introduced into the academy on the mechanical model of commercial industry and with the analogous purpose of turning out a large and well-regarded product.

Here was an accounting system that treated all kinds of knowledge as so many abstract and equivalent units of academic bullion, the weight and value of each further diminished by the university’s need to make a showing of the fullest possible stock on hand in the way of courses and electives—at least as much as the other department stores and often more than could be accommodated by the expertise of the faculty. Still, the bureaucratic order facilitated the surveillance of large numbers of youthful undergraduates even as it provided the administration with a ready statistical means of vaunting the university’s output.

Granted, Veblen exaggerated, but in part because he was more prophetic than actual.

Pecuniary Rationality at Chicago

It was left to Robert Maynard Hutchins—in the homage he paid to Veblen by naming his own critique Higher Learning in America (1995/1938)—to argue that money was the root of all academic evil. Of course universities need money, he said, but they ought to have an academic policy first and then try to finance it, rather than let finances determine their academic policy.

Hutchins was president of the University of Chicago when he wrote his sequel to Veblen, who for his part was attacking the business-like policies of the university’s first president, William Rainey Harper. And it was under the presidency of Hugo Sonnenschein in the 1990s that the university made the most dramatic moves toward academic capitalism.

An economist by trade, President Sonnenschein tirelessly belabored the faculty with facts, figures and diagrams showing that by comparison with so-called “peer institutions”—Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton and Columbia—Chicago had the greatest number of liberal arts faculty, the fewest undergraduates, the most graduates (hence the highest faculty to student and graduate to undergraduate ratios), etc. All of these are advantages in terms of research and learning, of course, but precisely scholarly virtues were what was wrong with us. What was wrong was the higher costs of our virtues and their lower rates of return than the more rational financial strategies of competing firms.

Once singularly figured in dollar signs, the university was reconfigured accordingly. The failings of our virtues were compensated by an increase in undergraduate enrollments and a decrease in graduate fellowships. Then there was the growth of the academic demimonde of part-time lecturers, “temp” instructors in language courses, TAs and graduate students doing standalone courses. Generally low paid and without supplementary benefits, this adjunct faculty has become noticeable enough at Chicago in recent years, although not as much as in the country at large in which some 70 percent of all faculty are adjuncts.

These were prosperous years, when the university’s endowment increased from about one billion to over three billion dollars. But the administration lowered the annual payout rate from the endowment, apparently more than once, reducing it to an abnormally low percentage—which meant that, all things taken together, instead of using the endowment to grow the university, the university was being abused to grow the endowment. Logically and categorically, the university powers-that-be considered the endowment as a “capital fund”—the increase of which would be the principal goal of a capitalist corporation.

The administration even contracted for a Taylorite efficiency study by Peat-Marwick & Co., one of the conclusions being that the “middle managers,” meaning the academic deans, were not sufficiently devoted to the profitability of their units. Above all, however, the size of the endowment relative to that of other universities—forget the operating budget—became a fetishized obsession of the administration, and our place in the national endowment standings was as closely watched and continuously reported as Ohio State University’s or University of Michigan’s rank in the national football polls.

Serving Society’s Interests

In relation to the longtime drift toward academic capitalism at Chicago and elsewhere, the Veblenian ideal of a university for itself has seemed utopian even to sympathetic commentators and simply crackpot to the large contingent of educational realists. All the same, the idealist sentiments of the ivory tower lingering in the professoriat have proved to be a more realistic
Corporatization and Phantom Innovation in University Marketing Strategies

Richard Handler
U Virginia

As a “middle-level manager” (an associate dean in arts and sciences) at a large state university, I want to comment on some implications of the marketizing of degrees “more as a ticket toward higher earnings, than as a pathway toward intellectual development,” in the words of the AN Call for Papers for this series.

First, this is a feature of contemporary life at elite as well as nonelite institutions. But it may perhaps be nostalgic to consider this a new feature of university life. In US society, higher education has always had multiple, often contradictory goals. The intellectual development of students was never more than one among other, equally important components of the institutional “mission,” with career mobility and social development being the two most obvious others. Moreover, anthropologists should understand the tension between intellectual and career goals as a rather obvious transformation of a deep cultural dichotomy, that
between the ideal and the practical, or the cultural and the economic. Corporate-ization may be particularly virulent at the present moment, but it is hardly a new state of affairs.

Second, it’s not clear to me that all institutional “stakeholders” want to hear current administrative discourses that stress the market-ability of educational credentials. In my work both as an adminis-trator and as an undergraduate advisor, I’m continually surprised by the many parents and students I meet who don’t want to evaluate educational choices in terms of market outcomes. This may be the case that private institutions have more room to maneuver around this issue than do state-supported ones, which must respond to legislators con-cerned with local labor markets. Still, in my opinion, institutions have been too quick to resort to the language of the market to jus-tify their intellectual work. And we haven’t done enough to explain to the public the ways in which innovation is built into university teaching and learning.

This brings me, finally, to the issue of “phantom innovation.” Top administrators believe they must create innovative programs to garner financial support from alumni, donors, tuition-paying par ents, charitable foundations and grant agencies. Here, I think, the current version of corporatization manifests itself with a vengeance. The corporate world does indeed trade in a discourse of innovation, and institutions of higher educa-tion are coming to depend increas-ingly on corporate money. (This is especially true in the case of public institutions, in which declining state support has triggered fund-raising campaigns on a scale, and imbued with a sense of urgency, unknown two decades ago.)

The cruel irony, however, is that the everyday processes of innova-tion (in teaching, learning, writing and research) at the heart of our institutions are rendered invisible in the business of pitching innova-tion in an apparently corpora-tized world. At my institution, for example, we suffer from a worsen-ing student-faculty ratio. Yet, we are told by “central development” (the chief fundraisers) that raising money for what we already do isn’t productive. Instead, top administrators dream up “innovative programs” aimed at students, parents and donors, pandering to their job-market anxieties and stoking their fantasies about “community” as the heart of the educational experience. What we get, then, at one end of the spectrum are special undergradu-ate “experiences,” like seminars for younger students (“your child will be taught in a small-class setting by a world-famous professor”), under-graduate research and a plethora of study-abroad programs; and, at the other end of the spectrum, new degree programs, like five-year programs in which students earn both a bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts and a professional master’s degree.

**Effective and Efficient**

**Productivity, Industrial Discipline and Higher Education**

**Ben Passmore**

**U System of Maryland**

*Effective and Efficient* is a formidable sector of the econ-omy, valued in the bil-lions of dollars and cited routinely as a key com-ponent of US eco-nomic competitive-ness (eg, the World Eco-nomic For-um’s Global Competitiv-ness Report). It is therefore unsurprising that “business” practices seem to be encroaching on much of the academy’s activity.

This is not a new issue. Thorstein Veblen viewed the advent of busi-ness practices and organizational styles as a serious threat to higher educa-tion, going so far as to com-pare in *Higher Learning in America* (1918) the assignment of credits and grade levels to the systems used to administer prisons. The influence of business on academia returned as a major debate in the 1950s, and has continued since that time, more or less uninterrupted.

Hence, the issue isn’t whether corporate practices within the acad-emy are new but, rather, what the current forces are that influence the shape of these practices today.

Given that the “market” has become philosophically under-standing as the only effective con-trolling factor in how goods and services are distributed, there has been a resulting general reduction and privatization of public services such as education. Policymakers argue that education is a private benefit and therefore high tuition costs are more than made up in lifetime earnings. Students are “investing” in their futures and the individual should bear the cost. Most features of higher education have been insulated from the worst extremities of this trend by arguing that our mission is economic and community development, a point that has resonance with corporate and government interests.

However, the logic of the market as the driver of efficiency remains and there has been inexorable pressure to involve “market-like” devices in university operations and approaches. This involves the review of all processes with goals which might include privatiz-ing or outsourcing, establishing detailed routinized accountability systems, or adopting specific strategies from other organizations (eg, hospital systems). This has led to a broad pattern of rationalization of all institutional processes—from food service to academic program review—to optimize productivity.

**COMMENTARY**

For example, beginning in 2003, the University System of Maryland’s Board of Regents formed an Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) workgroup. Its explicit goals were to “optimize the use of system resources” and “to change the way the system does business so it can deal effectively with its fiscal, enrollment demand, and person nel challenges.” As part of the E&E work, a set of academic initia-tives were developed which have

**See Effective & Efficient on page 8**