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Business and Educational Values

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In "Saving Honors in the Age of Standardization," Linda Frost astutely observes the confluence of two disturbing trends in higher education that are generating a current so deep and swift that one wonders if resistance is possible: the business model for education and the standardization of educational processes, especially through testing. Hardly an issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* appears without an article or discussion featuring business practices or business leaders dominating the landscape of this or that college or university. Rarely does a meeting with or missive from an administrator not include some element directly connected to one of these trends. Here in Georgia, the new Chancellor of the University System of Georgia is a business person and former CEO. My institution, Georgia Perimeter College—the third-largest school in the University System—has initiated a search for a new president, and the Chair of the Screening Committee is a business professor, as is another of only three total faculty on the committee. None are faculty members from the English Department, a humanities discipline, or one of the social sciences. What will be the background and passions of this new president is the obvious question, but the answers feel eerily preordained. Five to ten years ago, I recall, my somewhat reductive but comforting pat explanation for the hiring of business people as administrators at all levels of college and universities was that they seemed like people who were not smart or clever enough to make it in the business world. Outmaneuvering academics, however, was a game they could play, and we were fair and easy game. Moreover, everyone qualifies as an expert on education because all of us endured elementary, middle-school, high-school, and college classrooms for years. The situation has become more serious in recent years, and finding comfort in pat answers and reductionist barbs is not easy. I worry that the future of teaching is a race to retirement against the accelerating forces of standardization and business practices. Certainly that is not the epitaph I would like to read about my career in education, nor is it the environment I want my students to experience.

I spent several years in New York City after I graduated from college and before deciding to attend graduate school to earn a doctorate in English Literature. I worked on Wall Street and at Rockefeller Center in what I call my Junior Businessman phase. There I learned several lessons. Clearly, those individuals who could communicate and write well and exhibited a flexible and critical mind were the ones who were prospering and moving up the proverbial ladder. This observation from the real world has metamorphosed into a mantra in my composition classes to encourage students to recognize that they are likely to find themselves needing to write well no matter what profession they pursue. One other object lesson from the Wall Street firm that

seemed to have so little regard for my work and subsistence: about ten years after I left there, I learned that the principals had all been indicted and convicted of fraud. (Sometimes justice delayed is not justice denied; they were a sleazy bunch.) Certainly, I did not see in those New York City operations exemplars of business practices for the academy to emulate, and my confidence is not rising as I review the machinations of Enron, Ken Lay, and fellow travelers in the corporate world. Therein lies the problem. I am having a difficult time understanding what elements in the business world beckon as ones that the academy should embrace.

Accountability, especially fiscal accountability, is purportedly what colleges and universities must learn. Few of us are likely to argue for fiscal irresponsibility as the modus operandi we endorse for our institutions, but I do not see that colleges and universities are more egregious than our counterparts in business and politics on that score. Certainly fiscal responsibility is not the watchword of our federal government, where the deficit long ago transcended astronomical, or of most state governments making decisions based on the power and influence of lobbyists and the need to mollify the often parochial and shortsighted desires of constituents. Businesses appear most adept at rewarding upper management with huge salaries, thousands of times higher than the lowest-paid workers in the company, and golden parachutes, whether the company has prospered or not during their tenure. The *Chronicle* certainly attests to institutions' adopting this business practice as the salaries of presidents at major universities reach into the mid-to-upper six figures. In contrast, my first raise in three years last January resulted in a net decrease of twenty-five dollars in my monthly paycheck. Sharing the monetary rewards does not seem to be an element pulsating through the hearts of business leaders; greed and other self-serving motivations—not generosity and largesse—dominate.

Concern for workers and their quality of life does not appear to be a valued commodity in the business world. While workers' salaries succumb to the rising cost of living, health care and other benefits are receding as well. The signs of the times: a shrinking middle class and rising personal debt made easy and enticing by the ubiquitous credit card offers. The planet's environment and well being appear to be no beneficiary of corporate practices. I am struggling here to find many models to emulate besides something like what Ben & Jerry's attempted. Perhaps we are hearing only the bad news, but I suspect not. Businesses are, in fact, capable of many good things. In the early 1960s when the South was beginning to industrialize, my father was the production engineer/plant manager for a new garment factory in rural Mississippi. That factory was the first integrated factory in Mississippi and offered job training, supervisory positions, and decent wages in an area with few economic opportunities for blacks or whites. Over thirty-five years later, many decades after my father left that company, the factory stands abandoned and empty, by far the largest structure in the town, and that small town appears even smaller and less promising than it once was; upon every run-down porch across the sun-parched, raggedy field from the factory sit adults not at work at 10:30 in the morning. I suspect the economic prospects of the factory's owners are less grim and their porches a brighter hue.

Perhaps the answer to the question of what businesses can teach the academy is in the way we treat our students as they deal with the mechanics of applying to

schools, registering for classes, buying books, and dealing with the offices, typically understaffed and underappreciated, of support staff keeping the institution running. Treating students efficiently and with respect is critical; they are, however, not business customers and clients in the traditional sense. These terms are grossly misapplied to students. From taxpaying students at inexpensive state colleges to students paying five-figure tuition at prestigious private schools, they are not covering the cost of their education. Their educational purchase is subsidized by taxpayers and donors and endowments. Students are not customers paying in full for a product. In the Fall 1998 issue of the University of Iowa's *Spectator*, the alumni newsletter, Ed Folsom, the F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of English, offered this cogent perception of the metaphors explaining the students' place in the educational dynamic:

> Maybe now is a good time to alter the metaphors we employ to understand our labor: maybe our students are not customers, choosing among, buying, and consuming a bewildering array of educational products. Maybe, instead, they are our readers, the readers of this vast and contradictory and changing university of a poem, which exists primarily to keep generating more and better readers, readers who will talk back to us, readers with "supple and athletic minds" who will recognize their own diversity because we have awakened it in them with our diversity, readers whose imaginations will be unbridled because the subject of our university is them, each individually and all together. They are what we represent.

Within Folsom's metaphoric vision, education is not reductive and standardized, and it is not job training. Businesses can train our graduates to perform the specific tasks at hand if they have the intellectual wherewithal that Folsom describes, if they can think critically and can communicate clearly.

Students are not traditional clients for other reasons as well. Customers do not prove their competence as drivers to exit an automobile dealership with a new vehicle; they only have to be qualified to carry more debt. Hungry people do not have to prove they are meticulous or fastidious diners to receive their happy meals. While institutions, or honors programs for that matter, employ admission standards with the hope of selecting students who will be successful and thrive in their environment, how students appear on paper does not necessarily translate into success in undergraduate classes or honors programs. A constellation of factors from maturity and motivation to health and finances often determines whether students will prosper in school.

Obviously, all students are not the same, and we do not want them to be. They are not uniform when they arrive, and they should not be that way when they graduate. Rigidity and standardization should not be the objective. The problem with education is that it is messy and uncomfortable. Unfortunately, Americans appear locked in a phase where we do not want to notice circumstances that are messy, that are complex in nature, and we do not want to be discomfited. The problem is that education is at its best when it is complex, when it challenges the participants and makes them

feel a disease. In contrast, the promise and profit of many businesses depend on the uniformity or standardization of their product or service, and we may support them for those very reasons.

During the recent spring break, my wife and I had occasion to drive over two thousand miles. During the legs of the trip when we were traversing familiar ground with our animals (Bill Hall—a cat from Botswana—my wife's Peace Corps location, and Merriweather—the sweetest dog on the planet), we invariably stopped at a Wendy's; of the three located at convenient stopping points, we would only frequent two—the third was nasty. (Even where uniformity is of the highest priority, it is not always attained.) Wendy's offers decent vegetarian fare for me—salad and baked potato—and a pretty good chicken sandwich for Mary. This food and its prompt, efficient delivery served our purposes. In another phase of our spring travels, we sojourned with a van full of relatives to the funeral of a great uncle who was in his nineties and had enjoyed a long and healthy life. Although the distance was substantial, time was not a factor. We ventured miles from the highway to a small town in North Carolina where we lunched in a wonderfully quirky café with fresh ingredients and inventive selections. That adventure highlighted the food, the company, and the experience. These food options while traveling parallel our students' educational choices. Educational institutions—honors programs and colleges especially—should be unwilling to trade speed and efficiency in the classroom for depth and breadth; as Mohandas Gandhi wisely noted, "There is more to life than increasing its speed." We are in Frost's educational paradigm of "surprise and pleasure rather than predictability and presupposed knowledge."

I sympathize with Frost's colleague at NCHC's St. Louis conference who talked about the frustrations of listing learning outcomes on a syllabus: "I just want to say, 'I have no idea what we'll learn.'" That she says "we" and not "they" or "the students" seems significant. What a classroom full of diverse students will learn during a class session is unpredictable, especially if the class is an honors seminar with discussion as its pedagogical approach. In my classes, I certainly know some of the points and literary passages I hope will be part of what we discuss, but which ones we get to or how we approach them is often subject to the comments and observations of the students. I cannot predict what I, as part of the "we" above, will learn in class each day; that typically depends on the students and their providing a fair share of the "surprise and pleasure" of the educational experience. Whether they learn and understand, for example, epic conventions as we proceed is something I hope for, but that is only a portion of the outcome. Here we return to the murky world of means and ends to which Frost alludes. Memorizing the list of conventions is insufficient; students have to make them one of many tools for understanding the epic even as they realize that the great authors are reinvigorating and transforming the conventions. The process of reading and the conventions themselves are not static. Teachers can demonstrate the types of questions one can ask to elicit good discussion or open up a text, but they are certainly not all the questions that can be asked. Faculty must grade the papers—the end product—that our students produce, but the grade is a judgment about that work; it is not necessarily the definitive statement

about what our students have learned about or should learn about writing. In my English classes, through draft after draft students experience what writers have to do to master their craft or to produce superior texts. With luck and hard work and some verbal dexterity, they will perform well within the boundaries of the semester, but all English professors have had the experience of hearing from students a semester or two or three later who proudly state that they finally understand what we were trying to show them about writing and that they have written a great paper for a recent course. These students needed additional time and practice. I cannot fathom the intricacies of a system of accountability that can account for such students and their learning outcomes.

A friend who is an elementary school principal in North Carolina happened to read Frost's essay and an unfinished draft of this essay while visiting during her spring break. She expressed her dismay that the educational movement driving her school is reaching its tentacles into colleges and universities, places that she envisioned as the last bastion of hope for free thinking. If we think that outcomes assessment and standardized approaches to accountability have created excellence in K-12 education during the past several decades, then it makes sense for us to go down that well-traveled path. If instead we worry about the state of pre-college education and feel that the path it has taken is treacherous and demonstrably unsuccessful, then we had better find a fork in the road or at least a welcoming rest stop, and I do not mean Wendy's.

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