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SHRUNKEN HEADS:

The Humanities under the Corporate Model

Patricia P. Brodsky

Everyone who has been paying attention knows that the humanities, once the heart of the university, have been devalued in the United States. Thus, they are often the first victims of downsizing, tight budgets, or profit-driven schemes. The humanities can serve as a kind of mine canary: when poison gas builds up in academia, they are usually the first to feel its effects, but the other disciplines won't be far behind. When the humanities are handicapped and threatened by the corporate agenda, the whole academic endeavor as we know it is at risk.

What academia is now facing the health care industry has already undergone. Physicians are under pressure to make diagnoses and recommend treatments on the basis of profitability, not medical need. Doctors are forced into an assembly-line mode and a speed-up. Decisions are made by managers, under orders from the insurance companies that, increasingly, own the hospitals and facilities. Quality and choice have declined as prices have risen. Now there is talk of following the HMO's with the EMO—Education Maintenance Organizations. And the privatization of education is on the agenda of global trade organizations (WTO, FTAA, IMF, World Bank etc).

Education is being "redefined" around us, but we are not genuinely part of that process. On the contrary, we are its victims. Make no mistake—the corporate university is not about providing an education. It is about image and PR, about corporate funding, grants, business partnerships, profit, and control. Anything that interferes with these goals will be reshaped, reduced, or eliminated. Targeted for elimination are the rights of faculty to choose their own teaching methodologies, to set academic standards, and to control the curriculum. Students' choices will diminish and, in the long run, tuition will continue to rise. And freedom of speech in the classroom and in research will become an endangered species. The redefined university will have very little resemblance to that interconnected community that has evolved over hundreds of years.

Faculty and students have common interests and a common ground on which to unite in the face of these threats. Margaret Quan of the California Part-Time Faculty Association said it clearly: "Our working conditions are the students' learning conditions." An underpaid and overworked faculty that sees its function perverted and its discipline condemned as useless, that is kept busy and defensive jumping through senseless bureaucratic hoops, is not going to be able to focus on teaching and serving the academic community.

Corporate "redefinition" is also about reallocation—the redistribution of resources to predetermined "growth areas." The disciplines targeted for growth are not chosen by the academic community but by managers, consultants, and outside investors. Traditional programs not deemed profitable are starved for support, while the latest corporate fads are promoted and provided with funds for new positions, infrastructure, and publicity. It is generally the humanities—literature, languages, philosophy, history—

as well as the visual arts and basic sciences, that get the axe, for these subjects are not high on the scale of value in a society that emphasizes size, speed, and profitability.

Several events typically accompany the move toward corporatization. According to an AAUP brochure on the corporate model, "education is a commodity packaged to fit customer demand, priced to suit the market, and designed for efficient delivery. Corporate funding increasingly determines the scope and direction of academic research.... Scientific discoveries and creative works alike are judged in market terms."

As the corporate model takes hold, "pressure mounts for academe to conform to measurements that don't assess quality. Faculty careers are increasingly defined by the rules of the marketplace and by greater competition for publicly supported resources." The so-called "Blueprint for the Future," a far-reaching plan currently being promulgated at UMKC, mandates "a marked increase in overall faculty quality *as demonstrated by increased extramural funding (30-50% above the current base within the next six years)*" (emphasis added). But outside funding opportunities are notoriously unequal among various fields, e.g. computer technology, business, and the health sciences as opposed to the humanities and "unprofitable" types of basic science. Thus the equating of outside funding with "faculty quality" is not only false, it is also a formula for punishing the humanities and a dangerous move toward privatization of the University.

The AAUP brochure goes on, the "exploitation of contingent labor fosters a production-line attitude toward teaching...; the content in core courses is made uniform so that it can be delivered more efficiently..." It is also important to recognize that the creation of an overworked and under-paid contingent teaching faculty lacking the protections of job security and academic freedom not only makes profits through exploitation but also has a political purpose, to bring the faculty and its functions more tightly under administrative and corporate control.

Finally, the AAUP brochure addresses the question of distance education, or the "virtual university," which "defines teaching as managing information... [and] offer[s] a watered-down educational experience." Let me give you an example of the experience of one humanities department with the combined forces of the market and of an administration determined to impose the virtual model upon it.

Distance education used to mean the transmission of courses over many miles, serving a student audience that can't take regular courses on campus. In today's practice, however, distance education applies to both on- and off-campus instruction. It is merely the separation of teacher and student, the absence of face-to-face communication, or the physical absence of a teacher. Students can take courses, for example, in their dorm rooms or in computer labs. This model exists not to improve education or even convenience but to create an education market with a cheapened product. The market squeezes enormous profits out of exploited teachers (who become deprofessionalized clerical workers), students (who become captive consumers), and the public, whose taxes pay for the high cost of electronic technology. Quality control in instruction is sacrificed to the bottom line. The profits go to the corporations who design and sell the software, hardware, standardized exams, updates, and so on, and to a few well-placed administrators.

The failed experiment I am going to describe took place in the Language Resource Center at UMKC. It fits the description of distance education because it involved the physical absence of a teacher, and its purpose was to rake in profits with a substandard product and minimal labor costs. Had it continued, its long-term result would have been to hollow out the Foreign Language Department and turn it into an academic Quik Trip. In the place of professionals teaching the languages, literatures, and cultures of a dozen countries, we would have become a row of shrunken heads, the contents of our courses sucked out, our discipline reduced to rubble, and our students blithely ignorant of really existing foreign languages and cultures.

UMKC College and Departmental rules state that a course may be given as an experimental offering a limited number of times, but then must either be withdrawn from the schedule or sent to departmental and college curriculum committees for approval. This procedure allows for experimentation by the faculty along with quality control. It ensures that successful courses become institutionalized while those that were unsuccessful, for whatever reason, are not perpetuated. Several years ago the Dean of Arts & Sciences at that time asked the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures to offer a series of beginning language courses developed by someone outside the department. These German and Spanish courses were to be taught by computer in the Language Laboratory, rather than by a teacher in a traditional classroom. The Department agreed to do so, under the limited "experimental" number.

The word spread rapidly that the new courses were an easy way to get ten hours' credit and enrollments spiraled. But the Dean hired only one instructor per language. In German the numbers were small and the teacher went out of her way to help the students prevail in spite of the flawed methodology. However, at one point enrollment in first and second semester Spanish together reached 500 students, with one part-time faculty member in charge. There was obviously no personal contact, no teaching, and minimal learning. All the "instructor" did was record the results of the computer-graded exams and assign grades.

In addition, the Department faculty discovered that the so-called computer-delivered courses had numerous flaws in themselves. They had originally been developed for audiotapes and a workbook, and their creator had merely transferred the pictures and sound to computer software. The method employed was totally passive. Students didn't speak at all and rarely wrote. They looked at pictures and listened to voices say words and sentences. Nor were any grammatical concepts presented. Exercises were not interactive, nor did they take advantage of any other possibilities offered by computer technology. The only plus for the students was that they didn't have to show up for class at regularly scheduled times.

The problems worsened when students attempted to transfer from these courses into the mainstream curriculum at the third semester level, for they had learned virtually nothing. This caused havoc for instructors in the third semester courses, as well as hardship for the students. Their graduation dates sometimes had to be delayed, and they were justifiably angry at having wasted their time and money. It also necessitated our teaching additional remedial courses so that the students could fulfill their requirement.

From the Dean's point of view it was a great set-up. The students paid regular full tuition for each five-hour lab course, but he had to pay only two part-time salaries to two instructors. But it was clear to us that this scam was undermining academic standards while filling the College coffers, short-changing the students, exploiting the instructors, and threatening to ruin our good name.

The Departmental curriculum committee determined that the "experimental courses" were a failure, and voted unanimously to pull the plug. We would no longer offer them, and if they were given under other auspices, we would not grant foreign language credit for them. The Dean then told us we didn't know how to teach. He instructed staff at Registration to continue to allow students to enroll. Academic advisors were told to steer students into the courses.

We then made multiple announcements to the campus community that we were disassociating ourselves from these courses. When it became clear that we would not teach them, the Dean attempted to keep them alive by offering them through PACE (Program in Adult Continuing Education) and as 400 level (senior) psychology courses. For several years they appeared in the catalogue as "The psychology of learning Spanish."

Without language requirement credit, however, enrollment soon dropped. But it was only when the Dean stepped down in the summer of 2000 that this nightmare finally ended. In the meantime our department has hired a full-time linguist whose responsibilities include researching cutting edge technologies to support language teaching. The Department's position remains, first, that though technology can be a useful and creative aid to teaching and learning, it can never be the sole method used in a class, or an end in itself replacing face-to-face instruction. And second, that course content and methodology must remain in the hands of professionally trained faculty who actually teach the courses. The *AAUP Policy Documents and Reports*, the volume that outlines the principles accepted by most American colleges and universities, states it very succinctly: "The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction..." (183).

The case of the UMKC Foreign Language Department represented a serious threat to professional control of curriculum, educational standards, and faculty autonomy. An administrator imposed a methodology chosen by himself on a department which rejected it as fatally flawed. Displaying a complete disregard for the integrity of an academic discipline—not surprisingly one in the humanities—he tried to bully the faculty into compliance. He engaged in false advertising, claiming the courses would provide skills that the method was incapable of delivering. The motive was clearly "the bottom line." The astronomical enrollments had no relation to learning and teaching, but they did provide a burgeoning source of income for the Dean's budget.

If outsiders, whether administrators or corporations, seize control of what and how we teach, we will have lost the main battle in the war over education. The UMKC experience shows how quickly the function of professionals can be usurped by a profit-driven agenda and human beings can be replaced by software. Unless faculty insist on their intellectual property rights in binding agreements with the administration, online courses will become the property of the institution, and eventually teachers themselves will become largely redundant. Only a small staff—probably ill-paid part-timers—will be needed to produce new courses, up-date old ones, and communicate with students by e-mail, if at all. Our experience of one instructor "responsible" for 500 students is a warning of what the corporate agenda has in store for all of us.

A danger of a different sort was discussed in a recent article in *Mother Jones* (Eyal Press & Jennifer Washburn, "Digital Diplomas," Jan.-Feb. 2001). The authors point out the social inequities inherent in the spread of virtual or distance education according to the corporate model. "Distance learning," they write, "could split higher education into 'brick universities' that provide traditional degrees for those who can afford them and 'click universities,' that offer a form of glorified vocational training for everyone else." They cite a Professor of English at Georgetown, who says, "I see it as a class issue.... Who is going to end up in these distance-learning classes? Single moms, working parents—the very people who most desperately need social contact as part of their educational experience." Two other professors cited warn that "mass universities will deploy distance learning to deliver low-cost content ... necessary to turn working-class students into performers for low- and mid-level jobs in the global economy" (37).

Jane Buck, President of the National AAUP, reminds us of our professional responsibilities. "We aren't always right when we speak out, but we're always wrong when we don't." If we in the Humanities, indeed faculty in all disciplines, don't speak out and keep speaking out, we may all end up as a row of shrunken heads, decorating the walls of the corporate university.

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