

# Education as a Business

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The long-standing role of academic institutions has been to provide individuals with the skills necessary to understand the world around them and to successfully compete in the work force. More recently, business encroachment on academia wants to subvert this ideology: to apply a business model to the education process.

Academia is bombarded by a multitude of businesses vying to invade the educational realm: from offering, sponsoring, and *controlling* specialized programs, to direct funding research and controlling what becomes of the research data, to naming buildings and rooms after corporate sponsors. While some outside involvement is necessary, institutions, like all companies, must have procedures in place to control the outside influences lest they gain control of the institution itself. This article focuses on the business models that subvert the student-teacher relationship and is drawn from numerous discussions and events. Much of this information is compiled from postings to the Chemical Education Discussion List (ChemEd-L; <http://mailer.uwf.edu/archives/chemed-l.html>) and, while the arguments are not new, the novel perspectives of these individuals warrant recognition.

## **‘Product directed’ education**

Instead of preparing students for the workforce, companies are beginning to demand job-ready employees. To that end, some companies make ‘donations’ contingent on having a role in the development of programs to ensure students have the ‘right’ skills for their company. Other companies are more direct: providing resources (money and equipment), setting the curriculum and pre-requisites, selecting the students, and even selecting the instructors.

The result? Instead of an individual with a generalized education, individuals receive an education with the specific skills to meet the needs of a given company — a ‘product directed’ education. The shortsightedness of companies leaves these individuals with training for one or a few positions, but seldom with sufficient breadth to work with evolving technology or successfully compete for promotion within the company. What happens when that company is gone or that skill is no longer needed? For example, a college was approached by an IT firm offering to sponsor, coordinate, and direct a year-long computer program that trained students to fix Y2K related computer issues. The IT firm agreed to hire all the students completing the program.

## **‘Education as a business’ models**

*The instructor is the supervisor and the students are their employees*, made with the suggestion that the instructors’ salary is tied to the performance of the students. In application, this encourages low standards and grade inflation. Furthermore, shouldn’t the instructor (supervisor) have the power to select (hire) students best suited for the program and expel (fire) students if they do not meet expectations (do poorly on assessments)? (German, S., ChemEd-L, 03 Dec 01)

*The instructor is the employee and the students are their employer*, made with the suggestion that the student can direct the education they receive. Currently, programs of study are set by departments for various honor, major, and minor degrees, each with a set of required and optional courses. This model gives the student carte blanche over the courses they require for their degree, and given the laziness and/or aversion to difficult subjects by many students, many students’ course selection would trivialize the degree and fail to prepare them for future careers. When they do enter the workforce and are discovered to be unqualified, the credibility of the program, the institution, and all its graduates is questioned.

A variant that is, unfortunately, becoming common in K-12 has the parents as the ‘employer’. One common statement from parents wanting to control what and how their child does in school is “I pay your salary.” Would this line work on a police officer writing you a speeding ticket? Not a chance. Why should it work in academia where teachers — the education professionals — know best how and what to teach, and understand that sometimes the lessons are difficult. (Horton, M., ChemEd-L, 08 Mar 03)

*The student is the customer/consumer and the institution the vendor*, made with the inference that the customer is always right. This is best addressed with a series of quotes:

“Education is the only business in which the customer continually demands *LESS* for their money!” (Cooper, J., ChemEd-L, 03 Dec 01)

“...in the education business, ‘customers’ will kick, scratch, claw, lie, cheat, steal, and plagiarize to avoid getting their money’s worth!” (Davis, D., ChemEd-L, 11 Oct 02)

In this case, the student is too shortsighted or naïve to see the long-term implications of their choices. Standards are required so that students can effectively compete in the future workplace.

*The student is the product, the institution the vendor, and the customer is society and employers.* The institution prepares the product for market to the customer. The better the product, the greater the demand. In crafting a good product, there must be an effective quality assurance/quality control system to determine the quality of the product: rigorous courses and meaningful grades. Referring to poultry, there are grade A, grade B, utility, and chicken soup. (reference unavailable) This model maintains a high academic standard, provides individuals with the knowledge and skills to live in today's technological society, and provides skilled workers for employment in positions utilizing or developing technology.

## **Analogies**

① Imagine your child has broken his leg and is in terrible pain. You take them to the physician who provides a month's supply of morphine to ease the pain and a beautiful parchment certificate proclaiming that your child is cured. At the end of the month, your child is addicted to painkillers and will walk with a limp the rest of their life, if they walk at all. You sue for malpractice, right? The physician should have given more appropriate pain medication, set the bone, applied a cast, had follow-up visits to check healing and remove the cast.

Applying this to education: at the end of twelve years, the school gives your child a fancy parchment certificate proclaiming that they have learned this-and-that. In reality, they have been kept with their peers and shuffled through the system. Your child is also handicapped. (Denker, J., ChemEd-L, 20 Aug 04) That handicap may already be evident by your child's grades in the post secondary education system. The solution is *not* for post secondary instructors to continue passing the student, thereby perpetuating the problem, but for the student to be made aware of their handicap — grades — and do something about it! This could involve dedicating more time to that particular subject or taking upgrading courses.

② Making the decision to improve your health and fitness, you purchase a gym membership. How well does this work if, despite your best intentions, you never go to the gym?

Applying this to education: paying for courses gives you the privilege of attending class, learning new material, and expanding your understanding in that discipline. Paying doesn't guarantee you a grade in a course, much less a certificate, diploma, or degree. You only get out of education what you put in. (Williamson, T., Grant MacEwan College, personal communication, 27 Oct 05)

*When confronted by someone using these arguments, you could offer them a copy of this article and recommend they read it to gain a broader understanding of the business models within education. Which model would they like to have for themselves or their children?*