

Is corporate model right for higher education?

By Thomas G. Palaima *Austin American-Statesman*. Feb. 17, 1999 A 11

Many Texans read with great interest the 28-paragraph vision of the new century written by the chancellor of the UT system William H. Cunningham in the *Austin American-Statesman* (Jan. 24).

He identified the challenges that face our universities and the intelligent initiatives that are under way to make them more open, more diverse, and more well-suited to the educational needs of students in a state where advanced technology has replaced oil, cattle and agriculture as the bases for our economic well-being. The transformation from “mostly elitist roots into a system of wide educational opportunity” is a reality.

As a MacArthur fellow, and professor in the humanities, I found missing in this vision any concern for how we are addressing what I take to be the most serious mission of higher education: giving students an opportunity for four years at a crucial time in their lives to figure out what sort of people they are going to be.

We do need to create a better-educated work force, and knowledge is the “new engine of economic prosperity.” But nowhere did the chancellor’s vision speak to humanistic concerns, and he slipped in the arts in a one-sentence paragraph which encapsulates the prevailing vision of the future of higher education: “These universities also serve as great centers of research, scholarship and the arts—activities which expand the frontiers of knowledge, spur the development of new industries, serve as powerful magnets for business and enhance the quality of life for all.”

Where do the humanities fit in, if they do not appear on the chancellor’s road map to and through the 21st century? I at least would advise the public to demand that attention be paid to this vanishing element of higher education. Within the last decade, we have witnessed the imposition of a corporate model upon institutions of higher learning in subtle and overt ways. Last December, *The New York Times* described colleges and universities as “employment credentialing station” with “students as customers.”

More than 100 administrators from UT-Austin have participated in Ford Motor Corp. seminars on how to run our institution. Guess what model is used? Hint: Its prototype was the Model-T assembly line.

Students are not only viewed as ‘consumers’ who can dictate what they want to do with their educations, but they are also viewed by administrators and legislators as assembly-line products. Understandably then, the length of time these products have been staying on the undergraduate or graduate conveyor belts has been a serious political issue in Texas over the past five years. Legislators have imposed a 5 ½ year post-M.A. limit on graduate work, after which graduate programs are financially penalized for their supposed student laggards. Having just sat as an examiner of a superb dissertation in Sweden that was finished by a student who worked on it over 18 years while raising three children and being an official ‘wife’ in the Swedish diplomatic service, I wonder about the ‘professionalization’ of learning that such time limits imply.

Work in the humanities does not require laboratories and may only need computers for word-processing and simple data files. It can be done in the edges of our lives, but it will also enrich our lives. I work in a field which was literally created in 1952 with the decipherment of an ancient script by a British architect who worked on it in his spare time for 17 years. It is lucky Michael Ventris did not need a Ph.D. from UT.

Time limits have been proposed for undergraduates, too, with the ostensible purpose of eliminating the infamous Austin ‘slacker’. It seems hardly contemplated in the Capitol that students might use their undergraduate years to explore what will make them happier human beings and consequently more productive contributors to society. Such exploration might entail shocking actions like ‘switching majors’ or taking more electives. But a car frame on a conveyor belt cannot decide it would rather be an Escort than a Bronco. We have excellent fifth and even sixth-year students who have come to the field of classics late and stay on in order to solidify their languages, ancient and modern, or to work in specialized areas with distinguished faculty.

I think the time has come to rethink the corporate model of higher education in our state or at least to strengthen the neglected division of the company that should be adding a vital component to the products we manufacture.

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