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The 'Business Model' Is the Wrong Model

By Peter Katopes

In their honest desire to satisfy the current demand for “accountability” in higher education, many academics have begun to worship at the altar of the “business model,” believing that it provides the answers to student success that they seek. The business model is imposed, for example, when otherwise worthy academic programs are eliminated based on low enrollment alone since they couldn’t possibly be academically valuable if they don’t attract throngs; when professors are evaluated more on their popularity with students than on their teaching abilities (see *Inside Higher Ed’s* coverage of a particularly chilling example from Texas A&M University); or when institutions shun teaching high-risk stud

However, the business model, which prizes “customer satisfaction” or “efficiency” above all else, has led in higher education to an imbalance in the relation between student and institution, has led to a culture of entitlement and instant gratification, and has causal ties to the current fiscal crisis.

Businesses operate for a single fixed purpose: to generate profit. This does not make businesses either intrinsically evil or intrinsically good. Although the purposes it serves might have moral value, the pursuit of profit, in and of itself, is a morally neutral end. It is rather the means to the profit that determines its moral nature.

In this highly competitive education market, customer (student) satisfaction has become paramount. The more satisfied the student, the argument goes, the more he or she is willing to persist at the institution, the greater the graduation statistics, and the more enhanced the reputation of the institution.

In the first 18-22 years of life, huge numbers of American citizens spend anywhere from 6 to 10 hours a day in some sort of school environment. That school is a major formative experience is a fact so obvious that I am reluctant to repeat it. However, although having a profound faith in the efficacy of education and believing that enough of it delivered in the right way can provide a student not only with technical competence but also address and mitigate the effects of a variety of social issues, educators seem ambivalent at best and blind at worst to the effects of the behavioral models that schools at all levels seem to support.

This is perhaps nowhere more the case than in the environment of higher education. Driven by the desire to satisfy external agencies regarding “accountability,” many colleges for some 30 years have effectively altered the relationship between student and institution by defining students as “consumers” who are asked to evaluate instruction in

much the same way as banks ask their depositors to rate their services. Driven by the student “revolutions” of the 1960s, colleges have effectively placed the responsibility for determining the quality of instruction and curriculum in the control of those — the students — who are least competent to judge. This is not to say that students should have no input regarding the instruction they receive, but is rather a criticism of student evaluation instruments that often are poorly constructed and which often hold faculty hostage to student opinion. This practice runs the risk of turning faculty members into supplicants for student approval and creates a dangerous imbalance in the power relationship between faculty and students, one which might have a deleterious impact on the very thing — teaching — which it is supposed to improve.

Further, when colleges follow the business model in order to bolster enrollments or to compete for the “top” students, the results over time can also have serious consequences for the society as a whole. When rigor and purpose are replaced by luxury dormitories, state of the art health spas, haute cuisine cafeterias, and inflated grades, what is created is a culture of entitlement and a demand for instant gratification.

Historically, one reason for going away to college was to dislocate the young man or woman from their otherwise familiar environs to such an extent that they would be ready to “re-invent” themselves as, ideally, independent and responsible members of society. When colleges attempt to replicate — and in many cases even exceed — the conditions of the student’s pre-adult existence, one might well ask what it is they are teaching the students. Ideally, children are the center of their parents’ world and are indulged accordingly. What, however, does it mean to be an “adult”? Surely it can not be age alone which determines adulthood in contemporary society.

While it is true that 18-year olds have been awarded certain rights and privileges — the vote, for instance — which an earlier era restricted, American society has a very ambiguous understanding of what adulthood is. The extension of childhood well into a person’s 20s has been a growing and generally accepted trend. The identification of “helicopter parents,” that is, parents of college-age children who hover neurotically over their offspring even as they “send” them off to college, is becoming the bane of many college administrations.

Given that parents generally want “the best” for their children, they have begun to demand more for their money in the form of material improvements and services. While no one would argue that we should return to the ascetic conditions that existed on many campuses in the 20th century, it might be useful to remind ourselves what the rationale for those conditions was.

Why, then, do colleges engage in these practices? It is unlikely that they believe that it enhances learning. Rather, in the same way that a for-profit consumer business recognizes that it must satisfy those who are paying for their services, colleges do not wish to “offend” the people — parents — who generally pay the tuition bills. Again, it is precisely this sense of “profit,” and a skewed idea of customer satisfaction, which is an expression of a business model which is inappropriate to higher education.

That the “business model” works for business is of course an arguable proposition. One might well ask “Which business model are we talking about?” Is it the Enron model?

Adelphia? Lehman Brothers? You get the idea. As academics we owe it to ourselves to be more precise about the terms we use.

We should stop our unexamined admiration for something we do not understand and concentrate on the “education model.” The “business model” is the wrong model for education. We need to reaffirm what it is, beyond “technical” knowledge of a subject, that we wish our students to learn.

Higher education ought to involve dislocation. That is, we owe it to our students to help them to understand that they are not the center of any universe except perhaps their own; that their unsupported opinions and subjective feelings will carry little weight in the “real world”; and that gratification does not always occur on demand.

College ought not to be merely a place where someone learns “skills” and racks up credentials, but rather an environment and an experience in which students learn, in addition to history and literature and mathematics, also how to begin to navigate the adult civilized world in an adult, civilized, and responsible manner. Their naïve assumptions about life and nature should be tempered by the rigors of discourse, debate, and discussion. Higher education should be training for life as it is — not as it is imagined by the child’s mind.

When colleges adhere to the “business model” they create dangerous expectations for their students and do no service to the larger community.

Currently the nation faces an economic crisis the likes of which most of us have only had nightmares about. We as a nation have the lowest savings rate and highest personal debt of any industrialized nation. We have been taught for more than 30 years that we are entitled to get what we want when we want it. The sub-prime horror has been a result of a sense of this entitlement which pervades society at all levels: the top, the middle, the bottom.

It is time that our colleges return to their traditional mission of educating the populace for the long haul. And that means teaching them to live and serve within a context of responsibility, prudence, and care.

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